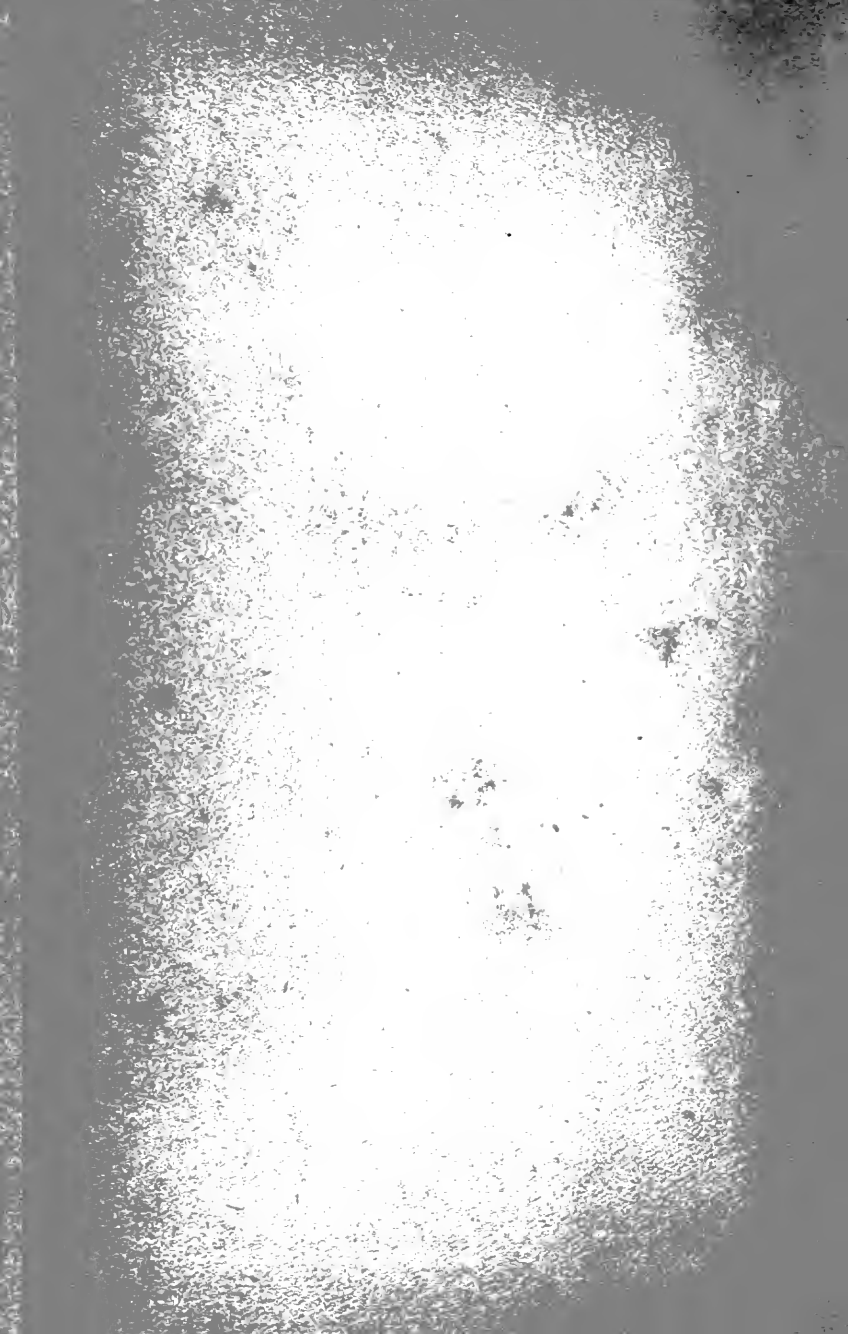


The Glowing Fire

Charles D. Musgrove





from Mr. Swan
Hann

THE GLOWING FIRE

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THE GLOWING FIRE

By
CHARLES D. MUSGROVE



LONDON
JOHN OUSELEY LIMITED
FLEET LANE, FARRINGDON STREET, E.C.



PR
6025
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To
A. H. B.

*We like a bit of colour, you and I. Yet at times
the skies are dark and life looms grey around us.
No matter: we can always draw aside the curtain
of the past and warm our souls with the glowing
memories of halcyon-days gone by.*

*I thought you might like to read the story of
our friend:*

*“ How his love for a maid bade him ‘ stay,’
And the charm of the East whispered
‘ come.’ ”*



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THE GLOWING FIRE

CHAPTER I

THE STORMY PETREL ON THE WING

THE shady avenue known as the Schauerstrasse, and situated in one of the quiet suburbs of the German port of Königsberg, looked invitingly cool on this hot August afternoon, and an elderly gentleman heaved a sigh of relief as he passed beneath the overhanging trees and left the glare and noise of the town behind him. The day had been exceptionally sultry, and the atmosphere of the office, in which he carried on the business of a shipping agent, had at last become almost unbearable.

Yet, from the expression on his face as he walked along, and from the manner in which, as he turned in at a gate towards the farther end of the road, he glanced up at the windows of his home, it would seem that he had not left care behind him, but rather as though he expected to find it awaiting him within.

As he went up the path, his wife, a buxom woman of fifty-five or so, came out to meet him. She was always there at this particular hour to welcome him, and as a rule they would sit on the bench inside the porch and look out over the garden, in which they took a justifiable pride.

To-day, however, they passed at once into the house, and the man's first words, in German—their native language—were: "How is Maurice this afternoon?"

"Just the same," was his wife's reply. "He takes no interest in anything, and seems just as depressed and worried as ever."

Then they walked together into the long, cool dining-room, where a young man of about twenty-eight years of age lay on a couch with his eyes closed.

The father, Lerman by name, bent over him and anxiously inquired: "How are you feeling now, Maurice?"

"No better," was the languid reply. "My nerves are all to pieces. This affair at the bank is going to kill me."

Mr Lerman sat down by the couch with a solicitous look on his face. "I do not see why you should take it so much to heart; it was not your fault that the robberies took place."

"That is all right," the son answered, "but they both occurred in my department, and the directors seem inclined to think that there must have been some slackness on my part. By the way, the doctor was here this morning, and he suggests that I should take a long voyage, so as to get away from the associations of it all."

This young man, Maurice Lerman, occupied an important post in a well-known bank in Königsberg. He had attained it by his own brains, for he was undoubtedly clever and had early attracted the notice of those in authority, leading to rapid promotion in consequence. An only child, he was the idol of his devoted parents, and it had been a sad blow to them when, within the space of three months, two thefts had taken place in the bank,

each of them in the department for which their son was responsible.

The first of these had been traced to a young clerk, some of the gold and missing notes having been discovered hidden in the bedroom chimney of his lodgings. He had been sentenced to three years' imprisonment and the trouble would seem to have been at an end so far as the bank was concerned.

Three months later, however, a second theft took place, larger by a sum amounting to several hundreds of pounds than the first one. Lerman, along with the managers, had spared neither time nor trouble to trace the culprit, but without success, and the strain of it had begun to tell in a serious manner upon this young man, who felt it keenly that these defalcations should have occurred under his jurisdiction. He became nervous and depressed and was forced to remain at home for a time to have a complete rest.

His parents were filled with anxiety as day by day passed and he did not appear to make any progress. His medical man was puzzled by his case as it did not present the features common to such a form of neurasthenia. The patient complained of an utter want of appetite, but did not look as though he were suffering from any lack of nourishment. Nor did he show such signs of sleeplessness as might have been expected after the recurring nights of wakefulness of which he spoke. A doctor may have his private opinion as to the trustworthiness of a patient's statements, but he is bound to accept them, or at any rate pretend to do so.

The consequence was that the good man, baffled by the futility of the treatment which he had prescribed, was thankful to concur in the suggestion,

initiated by the patient himself, that an extended tour would be of service in helping to efface these painful memories and produce the improvement so much desired.

Mr Lerman was not wealthy by any means, but was willing to make any sacrifice in order to carry out measures which might help to recuperate the shattered nervous system of the son who was the apple of his eye.

Hence it happened that a week later Maurice Lerman was seated in the train *en route* for Hamburg, where he was to take steamer for New York as the first stage of his tour round the world.

His own prescription must have been of speedy efficacy, for his appearance was certainly vastly improved to what it had been when we saw him lying on the couch in his home. There was little, we might say nothing, of the invalid about him now. Although barely an hour had passed since the train had steamed out of Königsberg he was enjoying a lively conversation with the other occupants of the carriage, a young lady and her brother who were returning to Berlin after a holiday. He had already succeeded in making an impression on the girl, for he was an adept at ingratiating himself with the female sex.

His proficiency in this direction was not due to the possession of good looks, for he had no more than the average of these. Barely of medium height, with nondescript-coloured hair and grey eyes, his appearance was not a striking one at first sight. Yet he had a born faculty for making acquaintanceships, even among the veriest strangers. When he began to talk to them his eyes, which had a somewhat hard look when in repose, would become wonderfully sympathetic and invite confidences. It was only after parting

from him that the aforesaid strangers would have an uncomfortable feeling that they had said more than was discreet and had received very little in return. This faculty of his did not tend to make him popular among those who knew him best, but it had done much to account for his success in his work.

Later in the day, when his fellow-travellers had to change trains, Lerman made the girl's heart jump with the tender glance of his eyes and the almost imperceptible pressure of his hand as, after an exchange of cards, he bade them farewell.

It was the girl who stole a glance at the compartment she had just stepped out of. Maurice, strange to say, was gazing out of the opposite window with a look of absolute indifference on his countenance. He did not trouble to look at the name and address on the card he had received, but quietly flicked it out of the window. The one he had given them did not enlighten them to any great extent, as it had the bare name without any address. He never saw or heard of them again, and did not regret the fact. He had succeeded in producing a flutter in a maiden heart, which was one of his chief amusements, and was perfectly satisfied in consequence.

Six months later Maurice Lerman passed this same spot, but in the opposite direction, on his way back to the home where two faithful old souls were awaiting the son who was their hope and pride. The snow lay thick on the ground, but his face was tanned with the sunshine of tropical countries through which he had been travelling. In all other respects he was much the same as when we saw him last.

As he sat at the supper-table with his parents on the evening of his return, his father said:

"You look well, my boy. I hope your nerves are quite restored."

"I feel perfectly well, thank you," was the reply.

"That is good," Mr Lerman said, with a pleased look on his kindly old face. "The bank authorities have been most attentive in inquiring for you, and have kept your place open, so that you may return to it as soon as you like."

"Very good of them, I am sure," Maurice remarked, "but they need not have troubled, as I have no intention of taking up banking again. I mean to go in for shipping."

The genial smile on the father's face gave way to a stare of blank astonishment. "You do not mean to go back when you were getting on so well?"

"No," Maurice answered emphatically, "that worry got on my nerves to such an extent that I do not feel disposed to run the risk of it again. I wish to go to Glasgow to learn shipping. I have heard of a likely office, a Mr Barclay's, that I could go to for a couple of years. If you were to write to him, as you do business with the man sometimes, he would let me learn the work in return for my services."

Maurice had had his way in everything since he was a child, and his father's opposition, feeble enough in all conscience, was soon waived aside and a letter was dispatched to Mr Barclay the following day. The reply was gracious to the point of patronage. Mr Barclay would be delighted to teach Mr Maurice all the details of the business, and would look after him well—which elicited a contemptuous snort from that young man—and Mrs Barclay and their daughter would do all they could to make his stay a happy one; their house

would always be open to him, and Mr Barclay hoped he would avail himself of their hospitality whenever he chose.

"That is what I intend to do," was Maurice's inward comment.

It was hard parting with their son again so soon after they had got him back, and a fortnight later the eyes of the father and mother filled, and their voices quavered, as they said good-bye. Maurice expressed the deepest regret at having to leave them once more, but his eyes were dry and his voice quite steady.

The sea may be calm and the sky blue, but the mariner who sees a stormy petrel fly past will look carefully to his sails, for he sees in it the harbinger of the coming storm. And there were five or six individuals of both sexes in Glasgow, who would have been vastly surprised had they known that the train which steamed out of Königsberg station on that February evening was bringing towards them one who was to have a strangely disturbing influence upon the course of their lives.

CHAPTER II

A SHATTERED IDOL

THE October afternoon was drawing to a close, and the ladies who had been shopping in Sauchiehall Street, Glasgow, were wending their way homewards or to the tea-shops, when the traffic suddenly appeared to become disorganised. Cabmen and bus-drivers pulled up with loud shouts of "Move on." The pavements were crowded with pedestrians who found it impossible to proceed any farther, and there was general demoralisation. Then a wagonette, filled with young men in costumes of every degree of grotesqueness, made its way along the centre of the street, followed by a long procession of similarly attired youths, cheering, laughing, shouting, and making weird noises on every sort of musical instrument, improvised and otherwise. They were marching ten abreast, which accounted for the fact that there was little room left for the normal traffic of that important thoroughfare.

It was the day of the Rectorial election in the University, and the students had determined to celebrate the occasion in what they deemed a fitting manner.

The wagonette was being driven by a tall, good-looking young fellow, dressed in a suit of oilskins with a red sash round his waist, and on his head an ancient top-hat, which from its crusted appearance and the rustiness of the streamers flowing out behind, would seem to have spent many years of

faithful service in the undertaking line. The sixteen men who had secured standing accommodation in the vehicle were singing "The Campbells are Coming" with great unanimity of spirit, if not of tune.

The joke would seem to have gone far enough from the police point of view as a sergeant, with two constables by his side, called out to them to draw on one side and leave the traffic clear. A derisive cheer was the only response and the cavalcade attempted to move on. By this time the street was crowded with spectators, some enjoying the fun and the discomfiture of the police, others loud in their disapproval of what they considered an unwarranted interference with their comfort. Some roared with laughter, others scowled, but there was one face in that crowd on the pavement which did neither one nor the other, but looked abjectly miserable. The face in question belonged to a young lady of about twenty years of age, who had come out of a shop and been unable to escape from the throng. At first sight of the oncoming procession she had looked amused, but, as the wagonette drew nearer, the smile on her comely face disappeared, and her blue eyes filled with tears. For the man who was driving the wagonette, in a state of flushed excitement and dressed in such ridiculous garb, was the one whom, for twelve months past, she had enshrined in her maiden heart as her ideal of exalted manhood.

They had known each other since childhood these two, the young fellow on the box-seat and the girl on the pavement, but for two years, while she was at school in France, had never met, as he had happened to be away on the occasion of her one holiday. Shortly after her return, however, they had both chanced to be present at an evening party,

and the raw-boned youth had developed into a striking-looking man, his six feet of height admirably proportioned, while his swarthy complexion, black curly hair, and glowing dark eyes singled him out as one worth turning round to look at, and made his neighbours somewhat pale and insipid by contrast.

She would have indignantly scouted the idea that she had fallen in love with him unasked, and thus been untrue to her maiden modesty, but the fact remained, and she sometimes blushed in secret to think of it, that when she, Marian Barclay, met Eric Rankin her heart would not keep quiet, and that at other times his image was seldom long absent from her mind.

She kept her secret to herself, however, for she had the good sense to see that her feelings were not reciprocated. Rankin was chivalrous and attentive, as was his habit with all women, but had shown no special preference for her. He had not failed to observe that the crude beauty of the schoolgirl had given place to a sweet, womanly dignity, and the coils of glossy fair hair were an improvement on the pigtails of her youth. The eyes alone remained the same in the frank openness of their ethereal blue. Yet she had stirred no fresh chords in him, and he had shown little interest in her whenever they had chanced to meet.

The girl found a strange joy, however, in thinking of him, though the idea that he might ever come to care for her never entered her mind, or, if it did, she speedily put it out again. She did not deem herself worthy of the notice of one whom she held in such high esteem. As she emerged from a shop-door on that eventful afternoon of the procession and found herself hemmed in by the surging crowd, the sight of her hero in his absurd get-up

came to her with a rude shock, as though some unseen hand had knocked her idol off its pedestal and shattered it in fragments at her feet.

Gladly would she have turned away and hidden the spectacle from her sight, but the pressure of the crowd prevented her. She breathed a sigh of relief as the wagonette moved on, thankful that she would be able to make her escape. Just then there was a great shout, and the crowd pressed forward once more. Several more policemen had hurried up, there was a halt, the angry voices of the constables could be heard above the shouts of derision on the part of the students, and then the terrible thing happened. Eric Rankin had become more and more excited as he had tried in vain to whip up the horses, but it was in fun and not in anger that he had swung round the butt-end of his whip and knocked the policeman's helmet off his head. There was a scuffle, and the girl's eyes dilated with horror as she saw the police make a rush for the driver's seat, and two pairs of mighty arms dragged her hero to the ground.

The other occupants of the vehicle jumped down to assist their comrade, while dozens of others hurried up from behind for the same purpose and joined in the mêlée. The officers of the law had been reinforced, however, and Marian felt her knees trembling and a deadly sense of nausea overcome her, as she saw the huge fellow overpowered at last and led away between two burly forms to the police station.

The crowd thinned and the girl was free to make her way home. She felt as though she had just emerged from a suffocating nightmare, and all she longed for was to be alone. She turned down a side-street, where at any rate she might be able to breathe and recover her equanimity, when an

insinuating voice close behind her said, " Good afternoon, Miss Barclay, I am afraid you are not feeling well."

Not a dozen paces from where Marian Barclay had been standing there had been another spectator, who had taken a more than ordinary interest in the scene which had just been enacted. A pair of hard grey eyes, set in a foreign-looking face, had witnessed the episode with an air of contemptuous indifference until they happened to glance in the direction of the girl, and detect the emotions depicted on her countenance. Then the callous eyes became keen as razors, and a smile passed over the face of their owner. Yet it was not one of amusement but a malignant smile of triumph.

Six months earlier, when Maurice Lerman first arrived from Konigsberg, to enter Mr Barclay's office, it did not take that astute young man long to see that an easier way of acquiring a fortune, than the slow process of learning shipping and carrying it into practice, was within his reach. He did not neglect his work, however, on this account, but applied himself to it with even greater assiduity, for he was clever enough to see at the same time that the shortest way to ingratiate himself with his employer, and an important step towards securing the hand of that gentleman's daughter, and only child, in marriage was by showing his aptitude for the work of the office and his devotion to business.

He recognised one obstacle in the way, however. Those hard grey eyes, which expressed so little and saw so much, had not failed to detect one fact, namely that Miss Barclay was not as indifferent to Eric Rankin as she would have wished to appear. What Maurice Lerman did not know of the ways of women was not worth knowing. 'Although but

twenty-eight, he had for years made a study of them as of many other things likely to be of service to him in his one object in life, namely money. Possessed of a singularly penetrating mind, and of talents which had already placed him ahead of his fellows, the ordinary modes of money-making, through long years of work and application, appeared too slow to his fancy. There are some temperaments which always prefer short cuts, even if they pass across forbidden ground. Craftiness may facilitate a man's progress, but it will rarely be in the right direction.

It did not escape his observation therefore that although Marian Barclay would talk freely about any other young man whose name cropped up in conversation, yet if Eric Rankin was mentioned she would refrain from any remark and exhibit an unconcern which was manifestly assumed. He had on one or two occasions, when dining with the Barclays, deliberately introduced Rankin's name, addressing himself to Marian in order to watch the effect.

"I met Rankin senior to-day," he said to her one evening during the course of the meal, "and thought him looking older. It's a pity that son of his gives him such a lot of worry." Marian ignored the remark, but the look of indignation which she could not conceal was sufficient answer, considering the object with which the observation had been made.

Mr Barclay took it up however. "I'm sorry to hear that. In what way does he worry him?"

"Oh, I did not mean to say anything against him, for young Rankin is a very decent fellow," was Lerman's reply, as he hastened to change the subject. Maurice Lerman rarely condescended to state facts, but he was an adept at conveying

impressions. It is the weapon of a coward for it leaves the victim defenceless, and in Lerman's case it was wielded not only with adroitness but with a charm of manner that was disarming in itself. Of all voices his was the one which Marian Barclay would have least wished to hear as she hurried away from the crowd and the sight of that hateful procession, in which her hero had played such a sorry part. Yet as she turned round at the sound of the words she heard as she hurried down the side-street, she saw Maurice Lerman walking a few paces behind her, and the next moment he was by her side.

The girl quickened her pace, and the man did likewise, and she knew that he was not to be shaken off. She was also aware that the pinpricks, which he had previously inflicted on her in connection with Eric Rankin, were as nothing to the stab which it was his intention now to deliver.

In a deferential and sympathetic voice he said, "I saw you in the crowd and thought you were going to faint."

"Not at all, I am quite well, thank you," was the chilling rejoinder.

"It was certainly alarming for a young lady," he went on, taking no notice of her answer, "to be mixed up in such a rabble and have to witness the goings-on of those hooligans."

Silence followed this remark, for the girl instinctively felt that she must either concur with him or defend the man to whom he referred, for she recognised at once that by "those hooligans" he had meant one man, and one only. The cruel part of it was that she felt as though her very silence was compromising. If she had ever been going to faint, his words had certainly restored her, for by this time her heart was throbbing, both with em-

barrassment and indignation, as though it would burst.

Then Lerman did the cleverest thing of all for he left her, saying politely, "You look better now so perhaps you will excuse me, as I am due at the office." He had no more wish than she to be more explicit, and had done all he had set out to do, and again had left an impression behind him.

Reaching home she went at once to her room and locked herself in. She was tired out with the emotions of the afternoon, and angry at the cruel position in which she had been placed, and her cheeks burned still more with maidenly shame as she remembered that it had all arisen out of her affection for a man who had never by word or look shown any preference for her. Strung up to the last degree she flung herself on her bed in an outburst of weeping.

An hour later she washed away the trace of the tell-tale tears and went down to the library to join her parents. Mr Barclay had just come in, and as she opened the door and entered the room she heard him say, "What an ass young Rankin made of himself this afternoon. He may think himself lucky to have got out of it so easily."

"What happened?" Mrs Barclay asked.

"He knocked a policeman's helmet off and was taken to the station. The court was still sitting so they brought him up at once. Fortunately for him they looked upon it as a student's frolic and discharged him with a caution."

They had not noticed that the door had been opened, nor did they hear anything as it was quietly shut again, and a girl went back to her room to have another cry, but not with sorrow this time.

CHAPTER III

MARCHING ORDERS

WHEN Eric Rankin left the police court, he found a huge crowd of students waiting for him, ready to escort him in triumph. He was in no mood, however, for any further buffoonery. The excitement of the afternoon's doings had evaporated, and he simply felt as if he had made a fool of himself. Taking advantage of a side-door, therefore, he eluded his enthusiastic admirers, and hurried home, to face what was to him worse than confronting a court of justice, namely, the inevitable interview with his father.

As he walked along, the keynote of his thoughts was that he had been a disappointment and a failure. His father, William Rankin, represented the third generation of men of that name who by their industry and aptitude for business had established the shipping firm of Rankin & Co., and raised it to a position second to none in the great northern port. In his early married life William Rankin's one hope had been for a son who should carry on the business after him. Two daughters had arrived in succession, and when at last the belated and much-hoped-for heir appeared he was no Rankin save in name. Instead of the fair, blue-eyed type which had been characteristic of the family, the new-born babe presented signs of a swarthinness, which afterwards became more pronounced as the boy grew up. He seemed rather as a stranger from some far-off sunny land

of the south than a native of the grey latitudes in which he was born. And he differed in temperament, as much as in looks, from his forbears, for he early developed artistic leanings, of which his father strongly disapproved, as likely to prove hostile to the work for which he had destined him. At the first signs of this proclivity on Eric's part, Mr Rankin had sternly forbidden him to waste his time in drawing, and that order was the starting point of a feud, silent for the most part, and perhaps all the more deadly on that account, which was to last for many a long, weary year.

On reaching home after his escapade with its unfortunate climax, Eric went to the library to await his father's return from the office. As he sat moodily by the fire, it was not so much the coming interview which occupied his mind, as visions of the past, at which he gazed much as a man might look at cinematograph pictures passing in succession before him.

A nursery schoolroom, at the close of a winter's afternoon, and a boy of eight gazing out of the window, flushed and angry. He had been obstreperous and his governess had left him by himself to recover, and he had gone to the window to look at the snow, in which he had wished to play in preference to doing his lessons. As he stood there his face became transformed and his eyes glowed with wonder. The sun was setting in a flame of glory and the beauty of colour dawned upon his little soul. The governess had left behind her a raging fury and had come back to find an artist.

The same boy, six months older, standing trembling before his father, who with a stern look of disapproval on his face was examining writing and sum books, disfigured or decorated—according

to your point of view—with drawings of every imaginable object, from the sun, moon, and stars, down to the domestic cat.

A black day, two years later, when everyone went about the house on tiptoe, with marks of grief on their faces. A sick-room heavy with the smell of antiseptics, and a boy standing by the bedside, while the eyes of the mother, who alone had understood him and could sympathise with his boyish feelings, looked up tenderly into his as he bent down to receive her farewell kiss. It often happens in stories that the hero's mother dies when he is a boy. It is no literary trick, for it simply means that if she had been spared the story would never have been written.

Another sick-room a year later, and the face of the man sitting by the fireside in the library softened as the picture passed before him—a carbolic sheet outside the door, and two nurses to look after the boy who was isolated in a wing of his home suffering from scarlet fever. A rap on the wall outside; one of the nurses opens the door and comes back carrying a large parcel. The string is cut and the cover removed, revealing a pile of drawing paper, pencils, crayons, and indiarubber, with a note from Mr Rankin to say that when Master Eric had finished these they must let him know and he could have some more. It was William Rankin himself who had gone to a shop and chosen these materials, and that act had been one of the greatest sacrifices of his life. He made a greater one many years afterwards, but a good deal happened in the meanwhile which might have been avoided if he had followed up this first one by a confidential talk with his son and thus learned something of his hopes and aspirations.

A tall, loose-limbed youth of eighteen leaving

boarding-school for the last time, and the voice of the headmaster saying to Mr Rankin, "What are you going to make of Eric?" and the look of horror as he heard the reply, "He is going into my business of course." "But he is a born artist, my dear sir," the first voice says. Then when Mr Rankin proves adamant, a plea for three years at the University, at any rate. A feeling of relief at the temporary respite gained as the father at last agrees to this proposal.

The end of it all—a police court and his father's certain displeasure and anger.

As Eric Rankin sat in his chair and thought over the years that had gone, a picture formed itself in his mind of a dreary road with an uninviting building at the end of it, and a youth who trudged along it, casting longing glances at the alluring side-paths, each leading to its own fairyland, where romance and art held high sway, and an inexorable figure in the form of his father calling him back and pointing to the building with OFFICE written across it, as the one goal towards which he must strive.

He was still contemplating this picture when the door opened, and Mr Rankin entered the room. Eric rose from his chair and they stood facing each other.

A strange contrast, these two, whom a stranger would scarcely have recognised as father and son. The one of barely medium height, with clear, blue-grey eyes and well-cut features with the sharp, decisive mouth, his almost boyish figure only belied by the whiteness of his hair and trim side-whiskers. The other, towering above him, as unlike him as it is possible for two human beings to be, with his swarthy skin and mass of black, curly hair. In one characteristic, however, they

were alike, for Eric Rankin had inherited his father's sense of probity, and would have died rather than have been guilty of any subterfuge or prevarication.

Their conversation was short and to the point.

"I have heard of your doings this afternoon," Mr Rankin said; "you will go up to the University in the morning and collect your books, and after that you will start work in the office at once."

"Very well, sir," was the reply.

It would have been better had the interview terminated at this stage, but as Eric turned to leave the room his father said, "I wish you were more like Mr Lerman. Although he has been with Mr Barclay for only six months he is a great help to him."

Eric's brows grew black, for he had disliked Maurice Lerman from the first day he had met him. "I am glad to hear it," he said, "and I only hope he won't help himself to something else one of these days."

With which enigmatical remark he went out, leaving Mr Rankin wondering what he had meant.

Eric crossed the hall and entered the breakfast-room. A slim, pretty girl was seated by the fire engaged in crotchet work. This was Elsie, the elder of his two sisters.

"By yourself, Elsie?" he said.

"No; only wish I was," she replied, "I'm playing gooseberry."

"I am here," said a voice from the corner, proceeding from a stout, good-tempered-looking man of about twenty-eight to thirty, who was seated with an air of extreme modesty on one end of the Chesterfield. "I just called to pay my annual visit on your sister Janet."

This was evidently meant for a joke, as he came on an average three times a week.

The young lady referred to occupied the opposite end of the lounge. She was a jolly, well-built girl, with a mischievous face, and was the tomboy of the family. People, who liked her, and that was everybody, called her plump. She described herself as "lumpy."

"I only wish it was an annual visit," she said; "he might as well take lodgings here and be done with it."

"Me 'eart is broke," said the stout man, who could not have looked miserable if he had tried. "Seventeen times have I laid my fortunes at her feet and she spurns me still. Here am I, John Miller, M.D., with the world at my feet, and a practice which, if not extensive, is select." (It consisted of two patients, one of whom being a relative was on the free list.) "Fancy all that, coupled with good looks and a fascinating manner, and she refuses it, actually refuses it," he exclaimed, placing his hand on his heart and looking round with an expression of bewilderment.

"But what's up, old chap?" he continued in a different tone of voice. "Have you swallowed a thunderstorm and got the lightning stuck in your throat?"

"No, something worse," Eric replied, and he retailed the afternoon's adventures of which none of them had heard.

"Well, cheer up," the doctor said, "no one will think any worse of you for it. Everybody knows what students are, and they will look upon it merely as a lark."

"I'm not concerned with what people think," said Eric, "but I am profoundly sorry to have

hurt the governor's feelings so much. *He* regards it as anything but a lark."

Then, as the two girls left the room to get ready for dinner, he continued:

"You see he has given me my marching orders, and I am to start work in the office to-morrow."

Miller's face became grave. He was a wag of the first order, and his love-affairs with Janet were conducted on lines which bordered on the burlesque, but underneath his facetiousness there lay a sympathetic heart and a far-seeing mind, which were always at the disposal of anyone in trouble.

"By Jove!" he said, "but that's hard lines on you. Why doesn't he let you be an artist? It's the thing you are made for. It's a case of shoving a square peg into a round hole to put you into business."

"I know that," replied Eric, "but it's no use. He is dead set against it and has been so ever since I was a child."

"Look here," Miller said, "I'll talk to him after dinner and make him see that this afternoon's affair is nothing very dreadful, and I shall have a chat with him about your future, too."

And after dinner was over good old Miller did his best, but he might as well have talked to a stone, and it was with a rueful face that he returned to the breakfast-room, where the two girls were waiting for him, Eric having gone out, as was his wont.

"It's no good," Miller said. "Your father won't give way, and poor old Eric has to start work in the morning. We must cheer him up the best we can. I wish he would take a fancy to some nice girl; it might help to reconcile him to his lot."

"Yes; and I wish that if he did it might be with Marian. She is the very girl for him," Elsie said.

"I am afraid old Barclay has other plans for her," Miller replied; "he is running that fellow Lerman for all he is worth, and Marian is one of those dutiful girls who think they must not disobey their parents."

"Disobey fiddlesticks," Janet interjected. "I should like to see the father who would make me marry a beast like that, or any other man I did not care for," with a significant look at Miller, who bowed in return.

"If you two are going to talk about your matrimonial plans I am off. Good night, Jack, half-past nine, you remember, not a minute later."

Her object in retiring was not, however, simply to give the lovers a quiet time to themselves, but to get away by herself. She was the one who understood Eric better than anyone had ever done since their mother had died. A sweet, gentle girl, her responsibilities had given her a wisdom beyond her years. It was with a heavy heart that she bid her father good night and went up to her room on the plea of a headache. As she sat there by the gas-fire her one thought was, "If only it could be Marian," and each time she said it something seemed to tell her that it was not to be.

CHAPTER IV

THE FACE IN THE PHOTOGRAPH

IN a certain side-street in Glasgow there is a shop with a sign informing the passer-by that it belongs to Malcolm Dagleish, Artist Photographer. The window is filled with portraits, which you would see at once were the work of a master-mind, or would do so if the accumulation of dust lying thick upon them did not hide most of them from your sight. For Dagleish was gifted with the rare faculty of making pictures of his photographs, and might have made a name and fortune as one of the most famous exponents of his craft had he but possessed the capacity of attending to his business instead of wasting his time and energy in other directions.

Unfortunately he was an eccentric Highlander, who did photography for a living and art as a pastime. He existed by the one and lived for the other, and the pastime had become such an absorbing passion as to interfere considerably with his means of livelihood. His clients were invariably delighted with the proofs, when after much delay they arrived, but when after further delay, and in spite of irate letters which elicited no replies, nothing more was seen or heard of the photos themselves, they naturally transferred their patronage to more punctilious if less accomplished craftsmen.

It was to this place that Eric Rankin wended his way on a winter's evening, some months after the

events of the last chapter. He knocked at the shop-door, and on being admitted by the caretaker walked straight through to the studio at the bottom of the garden, where Dagleish did most of his work. He was accustomed to wend his way hither at least twice a week, and the scene which met his eyes as he entered did not, therefore, strike him as forcibly as it would have impressed a stranger.

One of Dagleish's weekly "séances" as he chose to call them, was in progress, and, to use his own words, the ball of conversation was being tossed from hand to hand, and the bowl of good fellowship—a figurative expression be it observed, for although they all smoked inordinately they did not indulge in strong drink—was flowing around.

Dagleish was a perfectly guileless, in fact, a cultured and refined individual, but, like his studio, to which the application of the term "litter" would have been a compliment, appearances were against him. However cultured a man may be he does not look his best in a smock which has not been washed for a long time, if ever; with a shock of tousled hair which apparently had not been on speaking terms with either brush or comb; and with an old boot on one foot and a carpet slipper on the other, to say nothing of the utter absence of a collar or tie.

As to the studio, it was very much what you would have expected after seeing the owner. Pictures of all sorts lay about in glorious confusion, in company with palettes, paint-brushes, and easels. There were also a few portraits, mostly enlargements, and these were masterpieces, for only the *crème de la crème* of his productions found their way into this sacred place, which must not on any account be confused with the studio in

which he received his clients and used the camera, a contemptible piece of machinery in his estimation.

The seating accommodation consisted of two packing-cases, each capable of holding two persons; a table on which another seat could be improvised by the simple means of clearing a space in the litter which covered it, and spreading over it the least dirty duster you could find, as a protection to the clothes; and two so-called easy chairs. One of the latter was always given up to any stranger who might have availed himself of an invitation to spend an evening in this Bohemian atmosphere, by reason of the fact that it possessed four legs intact. If a second stranger arrived he was conducted carefully to the other chair and warned against pushing it back, as a missing leg had been replaced by a block of wood, and unwary visitors had been known to subside, both figuratively and literally, in the middle of their best story or at the crucial point of an argument.

As Eric entered he was greeted hospitably by Dagleish, who bade him take the only vacant seat, on one half of a packing-case, with strict injunctions to "mind the nails or you'll tear your breeks." The other half was occupied by Eric's chum, Jim Sanderson; the remaining case accommodated two art students who worked at the studio daily under the supervision of Dagleish; the table or rather the part which had been cleared for the purpose, was supporting Jack Miller, the doctor, and the less desirable of the chairs was filled by Dick Bridson, an analytical chemist, usually known by the euphemistic nickname of Ricardo Effluvio, on account of the smells which pervaded his laboratory.

To all of these Eric gave a friendly greeting, and then bowed somewhat stiffly to the occupant

of the other chair, and with a look of surprise, too, for that seat of honour was occupied by no other than Maurice Lerman. It was the first time that he had been a guest there, and it was also the last, and that particular chair was known ever afterwards as the "seat of the scornful." His presence in that assembly was due to an incautious invitation given him by Dagleish himself and it did not add to the enjoyment of the evening. Yet Lerman was both polite and agreeable, but behind his ever-present smile there was always the suggestion of a sneer.

As Eric sat down and lighted his pipe a discussion which had been suspended on his arrival was resumed with renewed vigour. Dagleish had picked up in a second-hand shop a painting which he declared to be a Turner. The two art students disagreed with him, and Eric was called upon for his opinion, neither of the others present being sufficiently artistic to pass judgment on the question.

"Come here, Rankin," Dagleish said. "It's a Turner I tell you. Did anybody else ever draw a tree like that?"

Eric took the picture in his hand and walked over to get a favourable light upon it. To see him at his best you had to watch him examining a piece of art. His eyes shone, and his whole nature seemed to be on fire.

"It's a Turner right enough," was his verdict, after a prolonged scrutiny; "you have got a find, Dagleish."

Dagleish almost danced in his excitement, but the students would not give way and strongly protested, so that the voting was still equal, two for and two against. Consequently Miller rose from his place in a solemn and dignified manner.

"My opinion has not been asked, strange to say; I will adjudicate."

They all laughed immoderately, as Miller knew as much about the inhabitants of the moon as about art. Nothing daunted, however, he inspected the painting in every possible light, turned it sideways and finally upside down, and then pronounced judgment.

"Gentlemen, we have here a work of art in regard to which my judgment has at last been asked and is being anxiously awaited. The question as to whether or not it is a Turner is a subsidiary one. The first point we have to decide is as to whether it represents a schoolboy's head or a bramble-bush."

That settled the matter, much to everybody's amusement, and order was restored among the disputants. Then as the others crossed the room to look at a picture which their host had just completed, Miller turned to Eric and said:

"Why on earth don't you start drawing or painting in your spare time? It would be the making of you."

"How can a man give his mind to art after he has been sticking his head into ledgers and bills of lading all day?" Eric replied.

"I suppose that is so," Miller said, "but you do seem to be at a loose end at present, old chap. Why don't you fall in love with some nice girl? That would do you as much good as anything."

Eric smiled down at the doctor's round, good-natured face. "You are very good to be worried on my behalf, but as to falling in love, I can never see where it comes in. Some girls may be nicer than others, but there is much of a sameness about them after all, and I fail to see how a man is to pick out one and think her better than any other."

Miller sighed. "Well, I can only hope you will change your opinion some day."

But he had not to wait until "some day," for, although Miller did not know it until afterwards, Eric altered his own opinion and went back on his words within the next quarter of an hour. He had little thought as he uttered those words that a few minutes later an incident was to occur, trivial enough to all appearance, but sufficient to alter the course of his life. A boat that is drifting on a calm summer sea does not need a storm to alter its direction. Beneath the surface of the still water there are unseen currents, which at any moment may point the prow either towards a dangerous shoal or to a place of safety.

The two men made a move to join the others, and as they did so Eric caught sight of an enlarged photo on an easel which Dagleish was evidently in process of colouring. He stopped to look at it, and exclaimed:

"I say, Dagleish, this is a fine bit of work! Why, it's Miss Barclay," he added.

"Yes; you would hardly recognise it at first; Dagleish is known as the great beautifier. The portrait is a bit flattering, is it not?"

Eric turned to the speaker, who was Lerman, and the look of indignation which he bestowed upon him was reflected on the faces around.

"That remark was rather uncalled for," he said, "especially considering the kindness the Barclays have shown you."

Lerman flushed angrily. "Call it kindness if you like, but when a girl throws herself at you and her father shoves her down your throat ten times a day, it is usually called by a different name."

The faces of the men standing in a group about

the photo grew dark, for everyone knew that this was a lie and an ungentlemanly remark into the bargain. Some of them knew also that what had inspired him to speak as he did was the fact that Marian Barclay, so far from throwing herself at him, had piqued him by not responding to his advances.

It was not the time or place to continue the discussion, and Dagleish therefore adroitly changed the conversation by asking Bridson, who possessed a fine bass voice, to give them a song. He complied, and others followed suit, but the zest had gone out of the evening's entertainment, and earlier than usual the men got up to leave.

As they stood in a group at the door bidding their host good night, Lerman, who had recognised that he had made a mistake, observed with a charming smile that what he had said about Miss Barclay was "simply in fun, of course," which remark was received in chilling silence.

As Eric and Miller, whose homes lay in the same direction, walked along together, the former was strangely silent. The doctor attributed it to annoyance at Lerman's behaviour, and told him not to mind what a bounder like that said.

"Oh, I'm not worried with anything a fellow of that sort says, although any man who speaks of a girl in such a way deserves to be thrashed."

Then, when they were half-way home, he stopped at a street corner and said, "If you don't mind, Jack, I shall have a walk before turning in."

Under ordinary circumstances he would have asked Miller to go with him, and as that decent-hearted fellow trudged home alone he said to himself that he could not make out what was up with Rankin to-night.

The truth was that the man of that name who left the studio was a very different individual from the one who had entered it three hours before. When first he had glanced at Marian Barclay's photo, something about it arrested his attention. He had called it a fine bit of work, but it was not that which had caused him to steal a look at it whenever opportunity offered during the rest of the evening. It is a singular fact that a photograph will reveal characteristics which are apt to pass unnoticed in real life, and will reveal traces of either good or evil which might otherwise never be suspected, and especially of the former. Perhaps it is because the usages of society compel us to maintain a polite conversation, and on this account we miss many points of goodness and beauty in the faces of those we meet.

As Eric Rankin looked into the face of the photograph, what appealed to him most of all was the sweet trustfulness in the quiet blue eyes of the girl he had known nearly all his life. The beauty of the shapely head with its wavy coils of light-brown hair struck him as never before; but it was her expression which haunted him after he left the studio, and deprived him of his powers of conversation. He wished to be alone to let his fancy dwell on the face that had burned itself into his very brain, and the memory of that face was with him in his walk; with him when he lay down to rest; with him in his dreams.

Eric Rankin was in love, with a photo it is true, but in love for all that, and he had taken the first step towards solving the problem as to how a man was to pick out one girl and say that she was better than any other.

CHAPTER V

AN EVENING AT HOME

THE grey light of morning has a reputation for bringing disillusionment. Many of us wonder at such a time how we could ever have thought and said and done things that only twelve hours previously had stirred our emotions, but which are apt to appear sadly colourless in the sober light of day. Yet when Eric Rankin awoke next morning the face which had looked out at him from the photo on the easel took possession of him even more strongly than it had done at the time.

He lay still, fixing every detail of the picture in his memory, until at last a burning desire rose within him to see the original. He had seen it of course scores, even hundreds of times before, as a child, as a growing girl, and of late in her budding womanhood, but the portrait had revealed to him traits of beauty, both in form and character, which had hitherto escaped his observation. The face was still with him as he dressed, and was perhaps accountable for the gash which the razor inflicted on his chin.

He was preoccupied at breakfast, and his sisters could not make out what was making him so unusually quiet. As he went through his day's work he made even more mistakes than usual, which is saying a good deal, for after five months of office work he had no more liking or aptitude for it than when he had first started. The face came between him and the paper on which he was

writing, and he wondered often, as the day dragged wearily along, why he had missed so many opportunities of studying it in reality. He had constantly met her at one place or another, either in his home, where she often dropped in to see his sisters, or elsewhere. He consoled himself with the fact that he had only to look out for her now and would be able in some way or other to see her before the day was over.

It is a well-known fact that if for any reason we specially wish to see someone whom we are in the habit of meeting constantly, fate seems to ordain that we meet everybody else that we have no desire to come across, and fail to obtain a glimpse of the one person we are looking for. Not only that day but seven others passed and he failed to see her, although he made excuses to go out in the afternoon along streets where he knew she was likely to be shopping, walked past her home in the evenings on his return from the office, and strove in every way possible to catch sight of her. Fate indeed seemed to be against him. One afternoon he had walked the length of three or four streets and was on his way back to the office when he met Janet.

"Well, Eric," she said, "where are you going?"

"Back to the office," was the reply; "I had to come out for something. What are you doing?"

"Been doing a bit of shopping," Janet said. "Marian is getting a new frock and I have been helping her to choose it. She left me only a few minutes ago to catch the tram, as they have someone coming into tea."

"Just my luck," Eric grumbled to himself as he strode on disconsolately.

He might of course have called at the Barclay's,

but had never done so before except by invitation, and thought it looked too marked to do so now. Or he might have proposed to his sisters that they should ask Marian in for the evening, but was afraid of the construction they might put upon his suggestion. People in his state of mind always have an instinctive dread that their motives are open to the whole world, and their inmost feelings bared for everyone's inspection. Consequently he had to trust to a chance meeting, and as the days went by he grew almost angry with the fates for denying him the one thing he desired.

Had he stopped to consider he would have seen what is apparent to the rest of us, namely that there was nothing extraordinary about it. He had many times gone for weeks, it might even be months, without meeting Marian Barclay, but then of course he had had no particular wish to meet her, which made all the difference. At last he began to think he should never see her again. Then he said that it did not matter if it was so. After that he went up to Dagleish's, and the first sight of the face on the easel brought back his longing with renewed force.

He could scarcely have said why he wished so ardently to meet her. His predominant feeling was one of curiosity as to whether her face did actually present those characteristics which her portrait had revealed to him. He knew something of what are called photographers' tricks, by which with a judicious manipulation of the light they can bring out points of beauty and hide defects so as to make a lovely picture, which cannot in all conscience be called a good likeness even by the most biassed observers. And Lerman's words would recur to his mind, "Dagleish, the great beautifier." Eric wondered sometimes if he had

not better be satisfied with a photo, and not risk the discovery that his queen was but a beggar-maid after all.

It was his custom to spend his evenings either at the Club or at Dagleish's. His father and he were of different temperaments, and since Eric had commenced work at the office, relations between them had become somewhat formal. They never quarrelled by word or look, but their mutual presence was not altogether congenial.

One evening Eric was returning home from business, and the dark February day had ended in a blinding storm of wind and hail. As he turned in at the gate and saw the ruddy glow from the curtained windows of his home streaming out into the darkness it flashed across his mind that this was his home, and an uncomfortable thought struck him as to whether he had quite done his duty by those within it. It is amazing how much thought can be compressed into the space of a couple of minutes, and before he had reached the door he had reviewed a good many things in his mind. He could not shut his eyes to the fact that his father had been unreasonable with him and had made a huge mistake in forcing him into a sphere of work for which he was utterly unsuited. At the same time he felt that he himself in turn might have been more considerate and have relieved the old man's loneliness a bit; for that his father was a lonely man he knew quite well. It dawned upon him, too, that he might have given his sisters a much better time of it, for much as his mother's death, so many years before, had meant to him, it meant even more to the girls now. His work might be uncongenial he reflected, but he had not made it any better by his carelessness and indifference, so why not begin afresh and try

to do things a bit better? "And after all," he concluded, "why should I make a nuisance of myself to the rest of them just because"—but by this time he had reached the dining-room door, and there was no time for further self-recriminations, so he contented himself with mentally ejaculating, "Curse me for a selfish beast," and walked into the room, and as his father and sisters looked up their faces brightened, for they saw the old winning smile that they had missed for so long.

It was the old Eric back again, the son and brother they had known in the old days, and it did their hearts good to see him again; it was the same smile, too, that used to break out after he had got over one of his tantrums in the old nursery days. Certain it is that it was a long while since they had enjoyed themselves as much as they did that night. Eric gave them all the news he could think of, and cracked jokes at their expense and his own until everybody got the feeling that they had suddenly become younger.

Mr Rankin's face lost some of its anxious lines, and he laughed as heartily as any of them. Only once did a shade of sadness come across it, and that was when he saw a vision which rose like a half-forgotten dream from the far-distant past. A delicate, sweet-faced woman, sitting in her chair by the fireside, her arm round the neck of a little, dark-eyed boy with a mass of tously black curls, and the marks of recent riot on his countenance; and a childish voice that said, "I'm sorry I've been naughty, mother," and a gentle one that replied, "This is mother's Eric come back again." And the man sitting at the head of the table wondered if he had done his duty by his motherless boy.

The meal, which had lasted about twice as long as usual, came to an end at last, and they all rose from the table. Eric said, "Look here, what would you girls like to do this evening? There's a good concert on to-night, or would you rather stay at home and have a bit of music or something?"

"Oh, stay at home," they both exclaimed, only too delighted to have their brother with them for a whole evening; a treat they had rarely enjoyed for months past. "Besides, we could not very well go out to-night, because Marian is coming in for an hour or two."

"Is she?" was Eric's sole comment, and his sisters thought he must be disappointed, from the indifferent way in which he said it. But they did not know that his heart had given a great jump at the sound of those words.

CHAPTER VI

THE FACE OF A GIRL

HOME was a comfortable place, reflected Eric, as he stretched out his legs towards the fire, whilst great gusts of hail pattered against the windows.

"Give us some music, Elsie," he said.

Elsie was the musical member of the family, and her playing was always worth listening to. Janet, on the other hand, could not by any means be called a pianist. Miller was the only one who ever expressed any appreciation of it, and when she asked him what on earth he liked about it, he said it was because he was of a military turn of mind and it reminded him of the tread of a mighty army. She herself said that she possessed exceptional advantages as a performer, for if she ever lost the use of her hands, it would not make any difference, as she could play quite as well with her feet.

Eric was fond of music, though he could not play, but to-night he paid little attention to it, as his mind was occupied in listening for the sound of the bell. Fortune had favoured him at last, and he was to have the best of opportunities of studying in the flesh the face which for a whole week had never been out of his thoughts. He could not but feel that he was standing at the parting of the ways. The reality might fall short of the picture. On the other hand it might not, and in that case who knows what might happen!

Suddenly the front-door bell rang; there was

a short pause, then the door opened and Miller's round face appeared.

"It's only you, is it?" Janet's voice was heard to say, "we were expecting Marian."

Miller attempted to look reproachful.

"I had come to take you for a walk, being such a beautiful evening. Now I shall punish you by sitting here for the next few hours."

On which he sat down, and said he would have told them a splendid story he had heard that day but unfortunately had forgotten the point, so would have to postpone it. However, he made up for it by a good deal of cheerful talk, as was his wont, and they had a lively time of it.

In the midst of their conversation, Eric got up and, leaving the room, went to the library, where his father was reading. "Come along, dad," he said, "and join in the fun."

And dad came along, and enjoyed himself, and all the more because his son had asked him.

"Marian will never come on a night like this," said Miller, as a terrific gust of wind shook the windows. And Eric wondered if he was to be disappointed after all.

"Of course she will," Janet said, "it would take more than this to keep her at home." And Eric felt as if he could have kissed her for saying it.

At that moment the bell rang again, and a girl's voice was heard in the hall.

The sisters rushed out to help her get her things off. "Back in a minute," they cried. The minute turned out to be twenty as it happened. A lady-journalist might be able to present a graphic account of the way in which they spent the time, with a liberal sprinkling of blouses, chiffons, hats, and many such-like things. The present biographer, being a mere man, must

content himself with the bald statement just recorded.

Then the rustle of skirts was heard on the stairs, the door opened, and the girl Eric had been waiting for walked in. His eyes devoured her face as she shook hands with Mr Rankin, though he strove to look as indifferent as might be. A sweet, winsome girl, with a smile which was her greatest charm, and which seemed to come as much from her eyes as from her lips. And the wind, which had not succeeded in keeping her at home, had added to her good looks by putting a glow into her cheeks and releasing tantalising little love-locks of her light-brown hair.

"I simply waltzed here," she said. "What a night! I was nearly blown off my feet once or twice."

"So was I," Miller interjected, "but my feet being so tiny I spun round in circles instead." He held up the members in question for their inspection, upon which his ladylove remarked:

"You need never be afraid of being swept off feet like those. You would only wobble backwards and forwards like the toy policemen the children play with. The ones that are weighted, you know."

"Which? The children or the policemen?" Miller inquired. A contemptuous glance being the only reply vouchsafed him, he added, "To counteract this tendency to excessive merriment, let us talk of something serious and melancholy, my wedding for instance."

The arrival of the coffee-tray, however, prevented any discussion of this enlivening topic, and Miller insisted on pouring out.

"Oh, stop him, somebody, he's sure to make a mess of it," Janet beseeched.

"Who is pouring out this coffee, you or I?" Miller said, in a severe and dignified tone of voice, as he stood with the coffee-pot poised in his hand.

"You are," she replied, "and I wish you would pour it into the cups, instead of all over the tray," and the laugh was at the doctor's expense this time.

The table had been cleared, and Mr Rankin had returned to the library, "To give you young folk a chance," he said.

As Elsie sat at the piano, quietly playing to herself, she looked across at the others, and a sense of contentment filled her mind.

Janet and Miller were sitting on the couch, side by side. There was no teasing or nonsense going on now, and as Elsie saw the face of the doctor, in which the look of fun had given place to a kindly seriousness, she felt thankful that this tomboy sister of hers had got such a good, true man for her future helpmate, and she knew too that in spite of their rollicking, bantering ways, they were deeply attached to each other.

Then her eyes wandered to where Eric sat by Marian, as he showed her a painting he had picked up, and of which he was very proud. We have said already that he looked his best when he was studying a picture, but to-night, thought Elsie, there was surely a more tender look in his eyes, and a deeper note in his voice than she had ever seen before. She thought of the night when her mind had run on the refrain, "If only it could be Marian!" Now her thought was, "*It must be Marian,*" and her heart gladdened at the unspoken words.

And what of herself, this sweet girl, who had been a mother to this brother and sister, the only mother they had known for a dozen years past?

What did the future hold in store for her? As she sat there with her fingers wandering quietly over the keys, she saw these two younger ones married. After that, herself by her father's side in his old age. And after that—the lonely furrow.

And as she thought of it, a vision came to her. The door of that very room opened, and a soldierly figure entered, to say good-bye before setting off for India. Once more she felt the pressure of his strong arms around her; once again she heard his loved voice saying, "Only three years, dearest, and after that we shall be always together." Then her face contracted with pain, and she seemed to age suddenly as she thought of a lonely grave far away in the Chitral hills, and of a brave young officer who had died in the service of his country and could never, never come back to her any more. The room swam before her eyes, blurred with tears to which she rarely gave way, but which would not be kept back now. Then she was recalled to herself by Marian's voice.

"It's actually ten o'clock. I must be going."

Eric rose, and said, "I will see you home," and Miller, who had intended to offer his services, prudently refrained from doing so.

"It is a shame to bring you out on such a night," Marian said, as they walked along.

Then a violent gust nearly took her off her feet, and might have done so had not a strong arm seized hers.

"Just as well I did come," Eric said, "or you might have been blown into mid-air," and he kept his arm where it was, in case of any more strong gusts.

They said little more to each other, but the girl did not complain to herself of that. She was sufficiently occupied with her own thoughts, or

emotions it would be more correct to say. When they arrived at the house, she asked him to come in, but he refused, saying that he was too wet. They shook hands and said "Good night," nothing more, and he went down the steps and out at the gate and set off for a walk. It was not an ideal evening for a stroll, but he paid no heed to the weather. He would have walked, in his present frame of mind, through a snowstorm, a cyclone and an earthquake rolled into one, and never have noticed that there was anything unusual about it. He wanted to be alone, as he had wanted to be by himself a week earlier after he had seen the face on the easel. Now he had seen the face itself and studied it for the first time in his life, and the portrait seemed to him to be a vile injustice. It was not half good enough.

For a whole hour he walked on in the storm, indifferent to everything save the face that had allured him with such irresistible force. It was probably more than a mere coincidence that his way home finally led him past the Barclay's house. It was all dark, except one room, in which a light was still shining and which he knew to be hers. In that room, though the man outside little thought it, a girl was sitting by the fire, trembling with joy, yet hardly daring to do so and ashamed of her own audacity, at the thought of something that had come to her that night. No girl would be so foolish as to think anything because a man had taken her arm to shield her from the storm, but no girl can help noting that he keeps it there, and with an ever-increasing pressure, long after its services are needed.

CHAPTER VII

AN AMIABLE FOREIGNER

"My dear I have invited Mr Plowitz to dinner this evening."

The speaker was Mr Barclay, who was sitting down to lunch with his wife, Marian being out for the day. He was a big, florid man, with a manner which he considered dignified, but which other people called pompous.

"Who is Mr Plowitz?" said Mrs Barclay.

"He is a man from Konigsberg, whom I was introduced to this morning. He is here for a couple of days only and leaves again to-morrow, and I thought Lerman would like to meet him, as they come from the same place."

"Mr Lerman always seems to be here," Mrs Barclay timidly remarked. "It does not seem to me to be the right thing considering Marian."

"Pooh, pooh, there's nothing in it," said Mr Barclay. "Besides if there was," he went on, without any idea that he was contradicting himself, "we have our daughter's future to think of."

"But surely you would never think of allowing Mr Lerman to pay any attention to Marian," Mrs Barclay said in a tone of alarm. "To tell the truth," she added in a firmer voice "there is something about him that I do not care for and never have done."

Mr Barclay was affronted. People often wondered how such a man as he ever came to have so charming a daughter as Marian, until they met

Mrs Barclay, whose look of faded beauty pathetically suggested what she must have been like as a young woman. Now she always seemed to have a tired look, and no wonder, for most people felt bored and even irritable after talking to her husband for half an hour, and sometimes debated within themselves as to how any woman had put up with him for a quarter of a century.

Not that Mr Barclay was unkind or at any rate meant to be so. But he had one guiding principle in life, namely that women had no right to any opinions of their own, but should be guided entirely by those of men—meaning of course himself. He prided himself on always getting his own way. He called it strength of will, but the aforesaid people termed it selfishness. Perhaps however his chief pride lay in the fact that he always stuck to his opinions. This he called being consistent, while other people dubbed it pig-headedness.

Now his opinion of Maurice Lerman had been formed and expressed in unmistakable language before he had ever set his eyes on the young man, and had been derived entirely from the letters on the subject which he had received from Mr Lerman, senior. Having given vent however to these opinions he would not budge, and he was therefore very much surprised that his wife should dare to run counter to him in this most uncalled-for manner.

"This is utter nonsense," he said; "why, he is a most estimable young man. He has magnificent business capabilities and is of the greatest possible assistance to me."

"I know nothing of his business talents," his wife answered; "I only know that I do not like him, and never have done, and never shall," she

added with an emphasis that almost startled her husband, but which only increased his obstinacy.

He was in fact dumbfounded. Never in the course of their married life had Mrs Barclay dared to oppose his views in this manner, and he could not make head or tail of it. He overlooked the fact that her daughter's welfare was in question. The mildest of creatures may become fierce when its young are in danger.

Lunch over, Mr Barclay left the house in a very stilted manner. "Master seems in a bit of a huff," the parlourmaid informed the other servants.

On returning to the office, he sent for Lerman.

"I met a Mr Plowitz this morning," he said, "and as he comes from Konigsberg I have asked him to dinner this evening and want you to meet him, so you will dine with us at seven."

"Thank you very much, I shall be delighted," was the reply, and Lerman returned to his work, but instead of continuing the letter he was writing he sat very still for some time, with a look of profound deliberation on his face.

At six o'clock Mr Plowitz arrived at the house with his host, as had been arranged beforehand. Settling themselves comfortably in the library, until dinner-time should arrive, they talked of various matters, and towards seven o'clock Mr Barclay remarked, "Lerman ought to be here in a minute or two."

As a matter of fact Lerman was there, and was gazing at them at that very moment.

Had anyone been stationed in the garden they might have observed a young man enter by the gate, and instead of walking up the path to the front door, as might have been expected of an invited guest, creep stealthily across the lawn and put his eye to the library window, just where a

chink in the Venetian blinds afforded a glimpse of the room. He kept his eye there, only moving his position slightly from time to time, until at last he appeared to have satisfied his curiosity as to what he saw within, for he recrossed the lawn as quietly as he had come, and slipped out again by the gate, closing it carefully and noiselessly behind him. Twenty minutes later a telegram arrived from him, apologising for his absence and stating that he had been detained on important business. Mr Barclay was disappointed, his wife was relieved, and the visitor expressed his polite regrets.

After dinner they adjourned to the library, in order that Mr Plowitz might enjoy his smoke. When they were comfortably settled in their respective chairs, Mr Barclay said, "It is surprising that living in Königsberg you have never come across the Lermans."

"Ach, it is not surprising," Plowitz replied, "my business takes me much out of the place and I do not meet many people in consequence. I have heard the name of course, and believe that the father is an admirable man. He comes of a good family, though they are in reduced circumstances compared with their ancestors."

Mr Barclay looked gratified. He had always said that the family was a good one, and was pleased to find himself in the right. He was in an unusually amiable mood to-night, for his visitor was exactly to his taste. The stout placid Teutonic face had a look of almost childlike innocence about it, and its owner deferred to his host's opinion on all matters in a way that that worthy gentleman thought showed better taste than he had been wont to experience in the case of his own countrymen.

"I have an idea," Plowitz went on, "that I once saw the father, but am not sure. I should hardly be likely to have met Maurice, as he was in the bank and my business is otherwise."

Mr Barclay would dearly like to have inquired the nature of his business, but the hints he threw out in this direction did not elicit any satisfactory reply and he did not like to put the plain question. He answered Mr Plowitz's queries as to young Lerman, how he was getting on and so forth, and painted the young man in such glowing colours, especially as to his devotion to business and incidentally to his employer at the same time, as would have raised a smile on that young man's countenance.

At last the guest said that he must go, as he had to make an early start next morning, and, with profuse thanks for the hospitality accorded him, drove back to his hotel. As soon as he was seated in the cab, he produced a pipe of huge dimensions, and lit it with an air of satisfaction, for he had been smoking cigars out of deference to his host. After a few whiffs, which nearly filled the cab with smoke, he leaned back and smiled to himself.

"Detained on urgent business, were you, my young friend? Ach, what matter, we shall meet again."

Meanwhile Mr Barclay was holding forth on the subject of the evening's guests, the one who had turned up and the one who had not. Marian had just arrived in a cab as Plowitz drove away, so she too had the benefit of his oratory. Two phrases had impressed him particularly, "good family" and "ancestors." He forgot that the former is of variable interpretation, while we all have the latter, though it does not follow that they are necessarily anything to boast of. He was all

the more fervid on account of Marian's presence, as he considered it a fitting opportunity of impressing upon that young woman the extraordinary chances that lay within her reach, and he felt somewhat nettled that she did not respond more readily to his enthusiasm.

To the relief of the female members of the household, bedtime came at last, but Mr Barclay did not drop the subject even then. His last words on the matter were, "What I cannot make out is why a man in Mr Plowitz's position has never met the Lermans."

His wife, who was tired and sleepy, did not reply, but her last thought was that although none of them had mentioned Lerman's Christian name, Mr Plowitz had more than once referred to him as "Maurice."

It would almost seem, did we not know to the contrary, after listening to his artless conversation, that the innocent-looking German knew more of that young man than he had made out to do.

CHAPTER VIII

A CHECK

FOR three days Eric Rankin felt as if he were walking on air. He could hardly pass a beggar in the street without stopping to give him a shilling, so that he too might have his share of the radiant happiness that is to be found in this best of all possible worlds.

The weather was execrable, for March had come in in its proverbial roaring-lion fashion, but to him it might have been the balmiest of springs. The lowering skies and muddy pavements, with their crust of half-frozen snow, might have been heavens of Italian blue and golden streets for all he cared. For was he not head over ears in love with the dearest and sweetest girl who ever lived?

His was that sanguine temperament that foresees no obstacles and brooks no delay. Indeed he would have called to see his inamorata on the next day after she had taken possession of his heart, had he not known from his sisters' conversation that she was going out each evening. When the third day arrived and she had no engagement, so far as he knew, he determined to call at her home on the chance of seeing her.

Accordingly immediately after dinner he set off, hoping in his heart of hearts that fate would be good to him. It was the first time that he had been to the house uninvited, and as he drew near to it he wondered what they would think of his visit. He was not a favourite of Mr Barclay, of

that he felt sure, from various things that had occurred between them in business matters, and he was not sure how that august gentleman would look upon his visit. Hence his confidence evaporated considerably as he stood on the doorstep after ringing the bell.

"Is Mrs Barclay at home?" he inquired as the maid opened the door.

"No, sir," was the reply, "Mr and Mrs Barclay have gone out, but Miss Marian is in."

His heart turned a somersault as he heard those words, and he stepped inside, and was shown into the library, where the first and only object he saw was the form of a girl in a white evening frock, comfortably curled up in an easy chair in front of the fire. She sprang up with a pretty air of embarrassment, and held 'out her hand. "How do you do," she said; "I am sorry that father is not in. He hardly ever goes out in the evening. You are unfortunate to have missed seeing him." Which greeting contained two unmistakable falsehoods, as she herself realised when she had time to think about it.

They must have both of them been mentally afflicted that evening, for Eric immediately told another untruth. "Oh it does not matter," he said. "I wanted to get an address from him, but any time will do, it is not important."

After this display of prevarication they sat down. Eric had been determined to be specially affable and to remove any impression which his previous indifference might have made upon her. He had an uncomfortable feeling that during the last winter he had been somewhat discourteous in going out to the Club or elsewhere when she happened to be spending the evening with his sisters.

To his dismay he now found himself sitting there

like a blushing tongue-tied schoolboy. The young lady on the other hand with the instincts of her sex was unusually self-possessed, which he regretted, regarding it as a sign of indifference.

He lost his shyness after a time and recovered his speech, and the next hour was Heaven to him. He could never remember afterwards what they talked about, but simply to sit there, seeing her face and listening to her voice was bliss to him, and it was a wrench to have to say at last that he must be going. The touch of her hand, as she said good night to him in the hall, thrilled him, and he would have dearly liked to have held it in his for a while. When she said, "Father and mother will be sorry not to have been at home," he felt an insane desire to say, "I am very glad they weren't," but prudence came to his aid and he refrained. With all his headstrong buoyancy he had the sense to see that he must hold himself in hand, and not make the mistake of scaring the maiden heart he was so anxious to secure for his own.

It was hours before he could get to sleep that night, but for once in this world insomnia was a blessing instead of a curse. For did not sleep mean oblivion, and wakefulness afford the sublime joy of thinking of the one girl in the world?

When he rose in the morning his own feeling was that of thankfulness at his happiness and good-fortune, and the whole day seemed to pass in a delicious dream. The very bills of lading might have been written on rose-coloured paper.

During the afternoon he had to go out on a message for his father, and as he was walking along with his head in the clouds, more concerned with the thoughts of his love than of the immediate object for which he had set out, he saw the girl

herself walking towards him, her face dimpled with smiles. And as he saw her, his own face darkened and something like an angry flush came over his features, for her companion was Maurice Lerman, and he would have rather seen her with any other man in the wide world than with that man. As he raised his hat to them, Lerman, in spite of the look of disapproval on Eric's face, or perhaps because of it, returned his salute with a particularly genial smile.

As Eric passed on, it was with the consciousness that his rosy dreams had been scattered and had given place to a sullen feeling of anger and annoyance. He would warn Marian, he told himself, against being seen with this man, whose reputation was none of the best. The opportunity came all too soon, and it would have been better for him had he had more time to cool down, until his calmer judgment was restored. It was only half an hour later, as he was returning to the office, that he met her again and she was alone this time. He stopped and shook hands with her, and turning round walked back in the direction in which she was going.

"Mr Lerman has gone to the office, I suppose," he said, with a view of introducing the subject.

Marian replied that he had done so.

"Do you know," Eric said, "I was sorry to see you walking out with him."

It was awkwardly put, and he saw that he had made a mistake, for the girl looked up with an angry flush on her face.

He had not realised that he had not the right to dictate to her as to her movements. He did not see either that in expressing himself in these words, he seemed to imply that she had accompanied Lerman of her own accord. It is one thing to walk

with a person, it is another and a very different thing to be compelled to do so, because you have no reasonable excuse for refusing. As a matter of fact, she had been considerably annoyed, on coming out of a shop, to find Lerman waiting for her, but if a man deliberately joins a girl, and strolls along by her side, she cannot very well turn round and tell him to begone, if he happens to be an acquaintance, and especially, as in this case, when he is a constant visitor at her father's house. It was little wonder therefore that she resented Eric's interference in the matter.

As they walked together, Eric tried his best to make amends, but Marian, although she said, "It's all right, we need not say any more about it," was feeling hurt, and there was a coolness in her voice in consequence. At the end of the street Eric said good-bye, and made his way back feeling angry, but with himself this time. A chilling thought struck him, which had never entered into his calculations during the past three days, the dread that he might fail to win her love after all.

Perhaps we can scarcely blame him for his previous air of confidence. A handsome young fellow with prospects of wealth in the future, he had been in the habit of receiving many a flattering glance from the eyes of charming young ladies, and many a delicate hint from the mammas of these maidens, and he had taken it for granted that the girl on whom he should eventually fix his choice would be ready to respond to his advances. Probably this would have been the case with most of those who had favoured him with their attentions. Now the one he desired seemed to be beyond his reach, and it was his own bungling hand that had pushed her from him.

The very thought of such a possibility made

her dearer than ever to him, and he felt an aching desire within him to be able to hold her in his arms and call her his own.

He arrived home that evening in a chastened frame of mind, and his sisters, who had been delighted with his buoyant manner of the last few days could see that there was something the matter with him. Elsie noticed it particularly, for between her and her brother there was always a strong bond of sympathy and she could read him like a book.

As they sat together in the drawing-room after dinner, Janet and Miller being engaged in what they called "private and urgent business" in the breakfast-room, she said to him, "You seem upset and worried to-night, Eric; has something gone wrong?"

"Decidedly wrong," he said. Then after a little hesitation he blurted out the truth. "And I have lost her just by my own asinine foolishness," he finished up by saying.

She took a seat on the couch, and gently drawing him down to sit on the floor beside her, put her arm round his neck, and stroking the wavy black hair said to him, "You are only a great baby after all, in spite of your six feet of height and your thirteen-stone training weight. If a girl loves a man or is going to love him, he won't lose her just for a trifle of that sort. Don't be in too big a hurry, for girls, nice ones at least, don't like to be rushed at, and you will win her heart sooner or later. If you did not, it would be as great a disappointment to me as to you. It has been the one thing I have longed for, Eric." And this girl, who herself knew love, and the bitter pangs of it, comforted him as no one else could have done.

He went circumspectly after that, and for a whole week made no attempt to see Marian again. Then he decided to call upon her one evening. It was with a trembling heart that he rang the bell, and a few moments later was shown into the library, where he found Mr and Mrs Barclay sitting. They talked for a few minutes, but there was no sign of Marian, and he was on the point of asking how she was when Mrs Barclay said, "I am sorry Marian is not able to come down, but she has a bad headache this evening."

It was the longest half-hour Eric had ever spent in his life, and Mr Barclay's platitudes had never seemed so wearisome. When he left the house it was with a heavy heart, for one idea had fixed itself in his mind. Was it an excuse on Marian's part to avoid seeing him, after the annoyance he had caused her? He little thought that someone else had been equally disappointed that evening, and that a girl had lifted her aching head from the pillow, when her mother went in to see her, and asking "Who was that who called to-night?" had felt inclined to cry when she heard who it had been. She had thought much about the episode which had occurred a week earlier, and had come to see the motives which had induced Eric to speak as he did. And, seeing them, she had made up her mind to let him see in his turn that she thought no worse of him for it.

Eric knew nothing of this, however, and to make matters worse, fate, which had favoured him on two occasions, seemed to have deserted him now. For weeks afterwards he had no chance of speech with her alone. If he called, Mr Barclay was there and monopolised the conversation, or worse still Maurice Lerman was spending the evening with them, sitting there like an evil genius, and taking

care to prevent anything in the shape of a *tête-à-tête* between them.

During those weeks Eric Rankin's mind was constantly dwelling on the face of the girl he loved, but oftentimes, as he thought of it, a foreign-looking face with a sneering smile would rise up and hide it from his sight.

CHAPTER IX

BY THE SILVER SEA

It was the middle of May, and spring, which had made several abortive attempts to show itself, shyly putting out its head occasionally, only to withdraw it again and give place to cold and wet, at last burst out in a glorious blaze of sunshine. The glass stood high and steady, and consequently Mr Rankin suggested that they should spend a few weeks in Arran, where their seaside residence was situated.

"You might ask Marian Barclay to go with you," he said; "it will do her good and she will be pleasant company for you girls."

"What about poor little me?" said Miller, who happened to be present; "am I to be left out in the cold, to toil and slave at my busy practice while you are all paddling and eating shrimps? Besides, what is to become of Janet? Marian and Elsie are as thick as bees, and the poor little dear will be terribly lonesome."

"Well, you had better come too," Mr Rankin said.

"It will be better than nobody," Janet reflected audibly.

"Thank you, dearest," Miller said.

So it was arranged that they should go on the following Tuesday, and Eric should come down each week-end from Friday to Monday. He was apprised of their plans when he came in shortly afterwards, and was well satisfied with them.

Whatever befell, he reflected, he would at least be able to see Marian without the chance of her father or Lerman being there to act as disturbing elements. He would commit no blunders this time, he determined, not even to make the mistake of being precipitate in showing his love in any way, or paying her too marked attention. "Get back to the old friendly footing, and that will be something to go on in future," was his wise conclusion.

He saw them off at the station on the day appointed, and then spent three days, of about three hundred hours each, waiting for Friday, when he was to take the four o'clock train for Ardrossan, *en route* for the island.

Friday morning seemed interminable, but the afternoon came at last. At three o'clock an important mail arrived demanding his instant attention in the absence of his father. He sat down and worked at it with feverish hurry, but, by the time he had finished, the hands of the clock stood at five minutes to four. He jumped into the waiting cab and promised the driver anything he liked to ask if he reached the station by the hour.

The driver did his best and so did the horse, but the station clock showed two minutes past when they arrived. Rushing on to the platform he saw that the train was still in, though the guard had his flag raised. A moment later the train moved out, but not until he had taken a flying leap through the door of a compartment which an obliging porter had opened for him. That porter got a tip a few days later which caused him to smile from one side of his face to the other.

As Eric looked out of the window and saw the telegraph poles flying past he had an inward

feeling, for which he could not account, that the train which was throbbing beneath his feet was whirling him to his fate. He longed intensely to be beside his beloved one again, but deep down in his heart there was the dread that, although he and she might arrive at the old friendly footing, they would never move an inch beyond it.

The train drew up at Ardrossan, and in a few minutes Eric was on the deck of the steamer. As he felt the sea-breeze on his face something of his old optimism returned to him. He took up his position in the bows, whence he could see Brodick, towards which the vessel was cutting its way along a line that might have been drawn by a ruler. The island drew gradually nearer, and the great hills, with Goatfell in the background, loomed larger and larger, their sides dark with shadows, but their summits bathed in an aureole of sunshine.

Yet it was not at the mountains that this man directed his gaze, but at the pier jutting from out of the little town that nestled at their base. "Would she be there to meet him?" was his one thought. The pier gradually lifted itself out of the water, until at last it stood clear and distinct. Then a splash of white could be seen on the end of it, and his heart beat the quicker for the sight. It was a white frock, he was soon able to discern, though the thought came to him that some other girl might be inside it. He tried to turn away his eyes, which were aching with the strain, but that little dab of white fascinated him and drew his gaze back to it. As he looked it split itself into two, and one of them moved to the other side of the pier. "If only it had been three," he thought; he would have been assured that she was there waiting for him.

Suddenly, as objects will do under such circumstances, they became the forms of girls in their summer frocks, but their sun-hats prevented him from seeing to whom they belonged.

The boat drew alongside and he walked up the gangway, and the next moment a voice which he recognised as Janet's said, " Well, you've come," to which he replied, " It would seem so "; and the next moment he was looking into the shade of the other sun-hat, where a pair of sweet blue eyes were raised to his, a pair of smiling lips framed a kindly welcome, and the touch of the hand which was held out to him thrilled him to such an extent that he nearly forgot to let it go again.

They walked off the pier and found the carriage waiting, and on the box-seat was Dr Miller, who touched his hat respectfully and said, " Welcome 'ome, sir, and I 'opes you are in fairly good 'ealth."

Being ordered to mind his own business and not take liberties, he touched up the horses and they set off on their three-mile drive to the house. Eric would have been well pleased if it had been thirty instead of three, for the drive was one that would have inspired a commercial traveller intent upon orders, to say nothing of a young man of artistic tastes and head over ears in love into the bargain.

The smooth white road, the trees in all the freshness of their new foliage, and the spring flowers that carpeted the green meadows and dotted the hedges—these of themselves were a sight not to be forgotten. Yet it was not they, but the face of the girl sitting beside him that made that all too short journey a glimpse of Heaven. The more he had studied that face in reality, the more he had come to the conclusion that the one

he had seen on the easel was not merely an injustice but a caricature, as he told himself and informed Dagleish later on.

The amateur driver, with his "flanky" as he called her, beside him on the box, did his best to beguile the time, if it had needed any such, by imparting information as to the various objects of interest which they passed.

"That's the pigsty where the dog tried to worry the pig and got sat on and rolled flat for his pains. They used him to fill up a broken winder afterwards; beg pardon, sir," he concluded, "I thought you spoke——"

"I said, 'Shut up,' " Eric replied.

"Right-oh," answered the irrepressible Jehu; "that's the 'ouse where my young woman here came from. She's a 'ousemaid now, and doing well, bless her."

"Bless you," Eric shouted, as the carriage lurched violently; it takes more than an amateur to drive a couple of spirited horses round a sharp corner, put your arm round a young lady's neck, and give her a kiss all at the same time. Further adventures were averted by the timely fact of their arrival at the house shortly afterwards. Miller descended from the box, and assisted the inside passengers to alight, meanwhile holding his hat in an expectant attitude.

They crossed the lawn to where Mr Rankin was sitting with Elsie by his side. Then they all adjourned to the dining-room, where a good old-fashioned tea-table took the place of the formal dinner. Mr Rankin stopped and said, "What on earth is that fellow doing now?" They all looked out towards the gate.

The real coachman had taken the horses to the stable, and Miller was standing on the gravel,

turning out the lining of his hat to look for the tip that perchance might have lodged there.

"Don't worry about him," Janet said; "he can't help it."

Where is the mortal who would wish for anything better than a sumptuous tea on a summer's evening after a long journey, especially when it is served in a long, cool dining-room, with its French windows opening on to a green sward that stretched down to the edge of the sands, beyond which there is an emerald sea, dotted with white sails and the curling smoke-trail of passing steamers? Eric for one would not have exchanged it for all the aldermanic dinners that were ever held. Indeed, bread and water in a garret would have been a feast to him just now, with the girl of his choice chatting to him from across the table with such a friendly smile on her face.

The meal came to an end all too soon, and they went out and walked along the sands, by the edge of the gently lapping water. It might be by accident, or it may have been by design on the part of the other members of the party who were in league, not against them but on their behalf, that Marian and Eric soon found themselves walking by themselves.

They strolled along to where a jutting rock afforded a comfortable ledge, and there they sat down. The sun had set by this time, but the coming night enveloped the scene with even greater beauty than the day had done. The subtle fragrance of this perfect evening, combined with the endearing presence of the girl by his side, entered into Eric's soul and wellnigh overpowered his senses. There was one mad moment in which he almost felt that whatever came of it he must seize her in his arms, even were it but to drive her

from him for ever; prudence, however, apart from his sense of chivalry, came to his aid. She had talked to him freely and without restraint, and he would not take advantage of her friendliness.

Strange to say, her attitude towards him was the only thing that troubled him. They had soon got back to the old friendly attitude, but he realised that he must wait with patience until this sisterly kindness should develop into love. In the meantime any mistake on his part, any hint of the love he felt for her, might have the effect of producing the very result he most feared and of losing him the little he had gained. Had he to wait for years he must possess his soul in patience until he saw some indication that he was more than a friend to her.

"What a lovely picture this would make," she suddenly exclaimed; "I wish you would paint it."

"I never paint now," he replied.

"Then I think it is a great shame of you to waste your talents; I wonder you did not become an artist instead of going into business."

"That was exactly what I wished to do," he said, "but my father gave me no choice in the matter. He has always been opposed to my taking up art. Even when I was a boy he forbade me to draw."

"Then I will speak to him about it," she said.

"It would be no use," Eric answered. "Miller kindly did the same and on the whole I think it made matters worse rather than better."

The girl looked out over the fast-darkening sea with pensive eyes. "It's a great pity, all the same," she said; and as they walked homewards talking in the same strain her heart went out to this man whose life she could see was being sadly spoiled by his warped ambitions, and she felt most

of all her powerlessness to help him in any way. Half an hour later there was a suspicion of tenderness in her voice as she bade him good night and retired to her room.

Sympathy on the part of a girl, in return for confidences on that of a man, not uncommonly weaves a cord which in time may serve to bind their hearts together.

CHAPTER X

A CLIMBING EXPEDITION

"WHAT a glorious morning! I'm going to give you all a treat to-day."

The speaker was Marian Barclay, who had just taken her seat at the breakfast-table. And of a truth it was a perfect day, with the sunshine pouring in through the open windows of the dining-room, from which could be seen the great stretch of sea as blue as the sky above it.

"What's the treat?" someone asked.

"I'm going to take you for a walk to the top of a hill, where I have found the finest view in the island. If our genial hostess," for such they had dubbed Elsie, "will allow us, we might have an early lunch and then set off."

"May I tum too, Auntie Eltie?" Miller asked.

"Yes, if you will promise to behave yourself properly," she answered.

"Is your little boy allowed to have a dash of tea in his milk?" she said, turning to Janet.

"Just for once," that young lady replied.

"We spoil him a bit when he is away from home."

"And some tugar too," a meek little voice echoed from the other end of the table.

It was a merry party, with one exception, and that exception was Eric Rankin, who all through that morning was unable to shake off a feeling of depression that hung over him. The truth was that he was suffering the tortures of Tantalus. It was maddening to him to be so near this girl he

loved and yet to know himself so far from her heart. Her very friendliness, the complacent, sisterly way in which she treated him, baffled him more than if she had avoided his presence or shown in any way whatsoever that she regarded him in a different manner from that in which she considered other people. He found it impossible to talk to her in a natural way and to be the agreeable friend he had determined beforehand to be. The hours seemed to him to drag like lead, and if the hours, what of the years that he might have to wait before any chords of love towards him stirred in her heart?

When they set out on their walk he could not help feeling, try as he might to be otherwise, that he was the wet blanket of the party. He did his best to overcome it, but his part of the general conversation was perfunctory and very different from his usual animated style. Yet what walk could have been more utterly delightful? The day was ideal, and the country looking its very best. As they left the road and passed through green meadows into the wood beyond, carpeted with blue-bells, and lit up with patches of sunlight that glinted through the trees, the sight was one to gladden the heart of any man, to say nothing of the soul of an artist. Yet this young fellow, who usually revelled in such things, scarcely noted them now, or if he did so, made no remark about them.

It was fortunate that Miller was there, and his banter was of the best possible service in distracting the attention of the rest of the company from Eric's moodiness. He had already suggested four times that they should partake of the tea which they had brought with them. The world suffers fools gladly, simply because it has found that it would get on badly without them. Not that Miller

was a fool; he only pretended to be one. It is a useful accomplishment in these days when every one is parading his little bit of wisdom *ad nauseam*.

For half an hour they walked through the cool shade of the wood, stopping now and then to admire lovely peeps of glen and sea. Then Miller stoutly refused to stir another step until he had had some refreshment. As the others were also feeling so disposed by this time, they found a convenient place where they could set out tea. After the meal was over and the crockery repacked in the hamper Elsie said that if they would excuse her she would not go any farther as she felt tired.

"You will have to excuse me too," said Miller, "I am not well. I am suffering from repletion beneath the diaphragm and anæmia of the brain."

"He means over-eating and imbecility," Janet translated. "But if he thinks he is going to stay here and have a quiet flirtation with Elsie he is very much mistaken, for I am going to stay too."

Marian made haste to say, "Well, we might as well all stop here; we can go to the top another day." She had felt since the morning that Eric was not at ease in her presence, though what she had done to offend or hurt him she could not make out. Anyhow she did not feel disposed to inflict her company upon him for the couple of hours which it would take them to get to the summit and back. As for Eric he said nothing one way or the other. He was torn in two between the mortification of missing such an opportunity of having her to himself, and the pain of being in her company alone, condemned to betray no sign of the passion that was holding him in its thralldom.

The question was settled by the other three, who would not hear of these two being deprived of the object of the afternoon's excursion, and insisted on

their carrying out the original plan. Miller had stayed behind, and Janet had taken her cue from him, solely to "give 'em a chance," as he expressed it. Had he known that he was giving them the most uncomfortable hour of their lives his round face might have lengthened considerably. Certainly Eric made up his mind, as he and Marian left the wood and began their climb up the mountain side, to throw off this glum mood which had been with him all day, and which he recognised as both weak and unreasonable. It was easier said than done, however, for he possessed the artistic temperament which is always liable to be at the mercy of the emotion of the moment.

He tried to talk on general topics, but his conversation was laboured and his thoughts seemed to be far away. Had his companion but known it, his thoughts were a good deal nearer home than she imagined, for they were entirely concentrated on the girl who was walking by his side. And she in her turn began to lose her vivacity and to feel injured by his manner. She had planned this excursion solely in order to give the whole party a treat, as she herself had expressed it at the breakfast-table. Now three members of it had basely deserted, and the only one left appeared absolutely indifferent to the glory of the views, which had filled her with admiration during a lonely stroll the day before and had led her to propose the outing.

Two or three times during the ascent she drew her companion's attention to some specially charming bits of scenery, but he only gazed at them with an indifferent look on his face and gave vague answers that were worse than none at all. This day, which she had meant to be a red-letter one, threatened to turn out a failure after all, and she

wished with all her heart that they had never come. There was only one hope left to her: that the incomparable view from the summit would rouse her companion to some enthusiasm; and the last quarter of an hour of the climb was passed with scarcely a word between them.

Then they reached the top and the view burst upon them in all its splendour. As the girl's eyes swept over the great panorama—the island beneath their feet with its spreading vistas of wood and glen, the sparkling summer sea that encircled it, the blue dome of the sky above, towards which the greater mountain of Goatfell raised its lofty head—as she saw all this, the discontent that had been rankling in her heart during the last hour fled; her face glowed with enthusiasm, and she exclaimed, “Oh, Eric, isn't it magnificent?”

“Yes, its very fine,” was the reply in an uninterested tone of voice.

The words, or rather the manner in which they were uttered, chilled her to the core, and the more so as she saw this man, who was as a rule such an ardent lover of scenery and would gaze at some delectable landscape for hours, looking straight before him with eyes that did not seem to see. A poignant sense of disappointment came over her, and it was all she could do to keep back the tears that were very near.

She sat down on a slab of rock and looked straight before her with a gaze that was as impassive as that of the man who continued to stand there without one word or look of appreciation of the grandeur she had expected would thrill his very soul. If her face was impassive, her mind was in a tumult with surprise and a feeling of resentment that she could not ward off.

For some minutes they remained thus until at

last she said, "Well, as you don't seem to care much for it, we might as well be getting back"; and the annoyance that she had been struggling to conceal made itself manifest in her voice.

The man turned round and stretched out his hand to help her to her feet, and as he felt the touch of her fingers the emotions that had been surging in his breast overwhelmed him. In a voice that vibrated with passion he said:

"Forgive me, Marian; I know you must think me a surly brute, but I can't help it. I know too that I have disappointed you terribly, in not seeming to like what you were so good as to bring me to see, but it isn't my fault. If it's anybody's it's yours, for I have no eyes for anything else while your face is in sight. I did not mean to speak to you like this, but it had to come out; I could not keep it to myself any longer. You make everything else look poor and commonplace in comparison." Then, seizing both her hands in his, he continued: "You have been a good friend and companion, but I want something more; I want your love, for I love you more than all the world besides."

When first he had begun to speak she had glanced up at him with a startled look, feeling almost as if she were being whirled off her feet with the rush of his words. Now, as she stood with her eyes fixed on the ground, he added in a quieter tone of voice, and with a ring of pathos in it, "Forget my madness, dearest; I know I have spoken too soon, and I fear that I have frightened you and spoiled my chances."

And at that she raised her head, and, looking up shyly into his face, whispered: "You have not spoken too soon, Eric," and a light that shone through her tears told him that the mistake he

had struggled so hard to avoid had been no mistake after all.

He loosened her hands, and, stretching out his arms towards her, folded her in his embrace. And on the summit of that glorious hill, with God's air and sunshine playing all about them, their lips met in one long betrothal kiss.

CHAPTER XI

A COLD DOUCHE

BRODICK PIER was fast receding from Eric Rankin's sight as he stood on the deck of the steamer on the following Monday morning. Three days before, from his position in the bow, he had watched a speck of white grow into the form of a girl; now as he leaned over the stern-rail he saw that same girl dwindle into a speck of white once more. Only three days, but what a world of happenings had come about in that short time! As the pier and the fast-dwindling outline of the girl, who still continued to stand there, faded in the haze he remained where he was, never taking his eyes from the place. Long after the coast was hidden from his sight he gazed along the broad ribbon of foam in the steamer's wake, for did not that wide track across the water lead to where he had left his beloved? Truly the world is made for lovers!

Then he let his memory dwell on the halcyon-days through which he had just passed. The never-to-be-forgotten walk on the Saturday evening, when he and she had strolled at the dictate of some strange fancy that had come to both of them, to the rock where they had sat only twenty-four hours before, stood out vividly in his mind. He had told her of his mad desire to seize her in his arms, and of how he had striven to hold himself in check, and had told her this with his arm around her and her dear head nestling against his shoulder.

Then he lived once more through the peaceful Sabbath, the best he had ever known. That day had been one long bliss to him, and would have been perfect save for one thing. There had been but one disturbing element, and that so slight and vague as to be scarcely perceptible, yet sufficient to impair the absolute serenity of it.

It had arisen through a simple remark made by his father. Mr Rankin had been gratified beyond measure when the young couple, on their return from their climb, had told him of the joy that had come to them. Marian was as dear as a daughter to him, and he welcomed her as he would have welcomed no other girl. It was while talking to Eric the next morning after breakfast that he said, "Have you given Mr Barclay a hint of what was in your mind?"

"No, I have not," replied Eric. "You see, I did not expect to say anything to Marian for a long time to come."

"Well, of course," said his father, "you will have to see him as soon as you get back."

That was all; nothing, one would think, to upset a young man who must have known that he would have to interview his future father-in-law. It was not the mention of Mr Barclay's name, however, that worried Eric, but a vision which that name conjured up in his mind—that of Lerman's sneering countenance. And the thought of that face would not leave him all day, try as he might to get rid of it. He laughed at himself for his fears, knowing that Marian disliked the man as much as he himself did, but the face haunted him in spite of all his efforts. No one else noticed that anything was troubling him. The undercurrent of thought which it set up was not enough to ruffle the surface, but it was just sufficient to stir the inmost depths of

his heart. What harm could Lerman do him? he argued with himself. Yet in spite of this he had an instinctive feeling which he could not shake off that some time or other that man would come between him and the girl he loved.

He was no coward, but this intangible dread took hold of him more than he cared to confess even to himself.

The steamer slowed down and soon afterwards he was in the train on his way to Glasgow. On his arrival he went straight to Mr Barclay's office and prepared himself for the interview. He had little to fear from that gentleman, he had persuaded himself on the way up. That important personage would be only too pleased to see his daughter engaged to the son of one of the wealthiest men in Glasgow. Eric's buoyancy had reasserted itself by this time, and it was with a light heart that he entered the private office and greeted the father of his future bride.

"Good morning, Mr Barclay," he said.

"Hullo, Rankin, what are you doing here? There is nothing wrong with Marian, is there?"

"No, nothing," replied Eric, "except that she has promised to marry me. I would have spoken to you about it, but—well—you see—there was no time."

"Oh, indeed; so you are engaged, are you?"

Mr Barclay leaned back in his chair, and his next words nearly knocked poor Eric down. "Well, I knew you were a confident sort of youth, but you certainly have a conscience to expect me to give my daughter to a man who is no good at his work and has been expelled from the University for taking part in a street brawl."

The words were a direct misrepresentation, but Mr Barclay was never addicted to understating

matters when he had a point to gain. Eric was about to refute the calumny, but at that moment the door opened and Lerman walked in with a message for his employer. He was withdrawing again with an apology but Mr Barclay called him back. "You need not go, Maurice," he said. "Mr Rankin and I have finished our conversation."

Lerman's observant eyes had detected at once that there was something wrong between these two, and his ready mind had quickly come to a conclusion as to the reason of it. Rankin had been spending a few days in Miss Barclay's company, and it was evident that the disagreement between him and her father must have some connection with that fact. His quick ear had not failed to note another detail, trivial enough in itself, but with a bearing that was all important under the circumstances, namely that Mr Barclay had called him by his Christian name and his rival by his surname. Consequently when he stood on one side and politely opened the door for Eric to pass out, he did it with a smile, but it was a smile of a fiend incarnate.

Rankin walked out of the office like a man in a dream. Of one thing only he was conscious, namely that his fears as to that detested face were not groundless after all. He went to business, but it is to be feared that it occupied little of his attention. As soon as he was free he sat down to write to the girl who had promised to be his wife. He had looked forward to this, his first love-letter, and all that was left to tell her was that her father would have none of him. For a long time he sat there with the blank sheet facing him, unable to make a start. His first attempt to write to her was the only occasion on which he found a difficulty in starting, save one other, but that was ever so long

afterwards, in a different place and for quite a different reason.

He managed to write it at last, but said no more than was actually necessary. "I will tell you more when we meet on Friday," he concluded by saying. But he did not tell her more on Friday, for the simple reason that when he reached Arran on that day he was met by the news that Marian had been summoned home in obedience to an urgent summons from her father, conveyed by means of a telegram received early that morning.

When Mr Barclay had arrived home to lunch on the fateful day on which he received Eric's news, he had found his wife waiting for him on the doorstep in a state of joyful excitement, and holding a letter in her hand.

"Have you heard from Marian?" she asked him, and when he said that he had not done so, she added, "You will never guess what she has written to tell us."

"I suppose you are referring to her engagement to young Rankin," he said. "He called to tell me the news, and went out again with his tail between his legs."

"You don't mean to say that you refused to sanction the engagement?" his wife falteringly inquired.

"That is exactly what I do mean to say," Mr Barclay said with emphasis. "So you can reconcile yourself to the fact at once."

Mrs Barclay tremblingly endeavoured to state her side of the case. "There is not a man in the world I would rather see Marian married to than Eric." But the more she tried to persuade him to take a different view of the matter the more obstinate he became.

"I have made up my mind," he blustered, "and,

as you know, I am not in the habit of changing it; so you need not say anything more about it." Goodness gracious! he did not know what was coming over women nowadays.

He had silenced her, but had not convinced her, and the thought galled him. During the melancholy meal that followed, it dawned upon him that it would be as well to stop any correspondence on the subject between mother and daughter. It was bad enough to expostulate with one stupid woman, but it would be intolerable for any self-respecting man to be confronted with two of them acting in collusion. His last words, therefore, as he left the table were, "I have not written to Marian about this, and I do not wish you to do so either. I will communicate my views to her when she returns."

It was after that that he evolved an ingenious plan, of which he felt justly proud, of sending his daughter a wire on the Thursday evening, too late for delivery in Brodick until the following morning, summoning her home at once. The idea was certainly a brilliant one, for it achieved two objects. It ensured his seeing her before she had a chance of talking to Eric, and it saved time too, which was an important matter, for if he allowed three weeks to elapse, who could say what construction these unreasonable women might put upon his silence. They might even think that he was veering round.

On the Friday morning he was at the station awaiting the arrival of the boat-train. As Marian sprang out of the carriage her first words were, "What is the matter, father? Is mother ill?"

"No, your mother is quite well. I should hardly have thought that you would need to ask what is the matter after the astounding piece of news which Master Eric gave me on Monday. I

presume that he has told you of the result of our interview."

"He told me a little in his letter, and said that he would give more particulars when he came down to-day. Of course I knew it would be a surprise to you, as it was to me, and, in fact, to him also, as I have learned since."

"As to his being surprised," said Mr Barclay, "I don't believe a word of it. As to the other particulars he speaks of, I can save him the trouble of enlarging upon them. The only one I know of is that I told him definitely, what I tell you now, that I will never sanction your engagement. So you can make up your mind to give him up at once, and let me hear no more of this nonsense."

"It was well put," he told himself, and left no room for doubt or discussion. But James Barclay had reckoned without his host. It happens not unseldom that an overbearing man, who has been in the habit of domineering his wife, finds his match in his daughters. The former is no blood-relation of his, while the latter, though they may be possessed of the mother's gentle nature, are apt to have inherited some of their father's masterfulness, and this is liable to come out when least expected. Regardless of the passers-by, Marian turned round and faced her father.

"That was why you sent this urgent message, was it? So that you might be able to coerce me before I saw mother or Eric."

It was exactly why Mr Barclay had done it, but when expressed by someone else in plain language, and delivered with an expression of withering scorn, it did not seem quite such a brilliant move as he had imagined it to be. "I will talk to you when I come home at lunch-time," he said.

"Meanwhile you can rely on one thing, and that is that I will never relent. You know my habit—I never go back on my word."

"Neither do I," Marian said. "It is one of the traits I have inherited from my father. I don't want to be undutiful, but if you think that I am going to retract what I have promised Eric Rankin, you are very much mistaken."

Two hours later, as Mr Barclay arrived for lunch, he reopened the subject by announcing that he had not budged a single inch from the position he had taken up. "And I will not have the fellow coming to the house," he told Marian.

"Then I shall meet him outside," was the quiet but determined reply.

Perhaps less harm would be done, her father reflected, by letting Rankin visit her in her own home at stated times than by risking frequent meetings elsewhere. He therefore gave his maganimous permission that Eric was to come to the house for one evening each week. Perhaps somewhere in the back of his mind there was an idea that what force had failed to do pinpricks might be able to achieve.

After lunch was over the girl was thankful to escape to her room to sit down and think matters out quietly. On one point her mind never wavered: no matter how much or how long her father opposed her engagement, nothing should separate her from Eric. That determination was in her mind as she sat there pondering over all that had happened during the past week. It was still there as, tired out with the emotions of the morning, she fell asleep in her chair. "Nothing shall ever separate us; nothing shall ever come between us."

Outside the rain was falling, for the weather had

broken-up at last. From the corner of the eaves above her window it dripped on to the stones below. It had dripped like this for years whenever there was rain, and at the place where it had fallen the stone was worn away.

CHAPTER XII

A DESPERATE ENCOUNTER

ON a warm evening towards the end of August Eric Rankin walked down the long, cool garden of their home in Murray Crescent, and entered the summer-house, where his sister Elsie was lying on a couch. He sat down by her side and asked her if she was feeling better.

"Much better to-day," she replied; "the pain has almost gone."

The summer had been a trying one, and for some weeks Elsie had been flagging and looking out of sorts. Her father had wished her to go for a change or see their medical man, but she had always protested that she was all right, only a bit tired, and would soon be herself again. Then one night she had gone to bed aching in every limb and unable to sleep, and when morning came found that she could not move owing to the pain in her joints. It was imperative that the doctor should be summoned at once, and Janet gave orders that Dr Glegg be asked to call.

"Oh, don't send for *him*," Elsie had said. "He is very kind, but I have no confidence in him, he is so old-fashioned. Let Jack come in to see me; I would rather have him than anyone else."

So Dr Miller was sent for, and felt honoured at being called, for he had always had a great respect for Elsie's judgment. As for Janet, she was as proud as if he had been summoned to see the Queen. And the patient felt better as soon as he

came into the room. This man who could play the fool to perfection had the born air of a physician when he found himself in the presence of sickness. He had the knack of cheering up his patients, but what most endeared him to them and gave them the comfort of feeling that they were absolutely safe in his hands, was the far-seeing look in the eyes that seemed to penetrate to the very heart of a case, and the firm set of the tightly closed lips. The voice that could turn any company to merriment was soothing now to the last degree in its quiet modulation, yet firm and decisive as he gave his orders to nurse or relative.

Something of all this showed in his face as he sat in the summer-house opposite his convalescent patient. They had placed a couch for her in the revolving shelter, and since she had been able to leave her room she had spent the greater part of the day in this spot.

"Marian was here to-day," Elsie said. "She comes to sit with me most afternoons."

"I wish she would come to sit with me most evenings," Eric gloomily remarked.

"I dare say she wishes she could too," Elsie replied, "but she is too proud to do so under the circumstances, and I admire her for it."

"Fancy my being allowed," with an emphasis on the word, "to visit her once a week, seventy-three to ten. She might be a servant with strict limitations as to followers. I'm sick of the old man's obstinacy, and it is beginning to tell on Marian too."

It was certainly telling on Eric himself, for there was an air of restless discontent about him in these days, and it was beginning to show itself in his face.

"Why don't you all go down to the park to

hear the band? It's a lovely evening, and it would do you more good than sitting here with an old croaker like me," Elsie said.

They demurred at leaving her, and as for her being a croaker, they would have none of it. "She's the best and brightest patient on my list," Miller said.

"Perhaps she's the only one," Eric suggested, with a return of the old twinkle in his eye.

As Elsie insisted on their going, they set off. They walked about for some time, listening to the music and chatting occasionally with an acquaintance, until Eric spied Mrs Barclay and Marian sitting on a couple of chairs near the bandstand. "I'm going to join them," he said, and was making his way towards them when he suddenly stopped and then turned back to where he had left Janet and Miller. For just as he was approaching them from behind, Maurice Lerman had appeared from the opposite direction, and with a profound bow and an ingratiating smile had sat down beside them. He might have done it a quarter of an hour earlier, but seeing Eric in the distance had waited until this moment for the express purpose of annoying him.

"Confound the fellow," Eric said, with a look of thunder on his countenance which boded ill for Lerman if they should ever meet on equal terms. "I can't stand here and see him sitting there beside Marian."

"Why don't you go and join them and show the fellow that you care nothing for him?" Miller said.

"Because it would please him to think I had gone simply because I was jealous of him." And with that he turned round and strode away. For the next two hours he walked ahead, little knowing

or caring where he went, and with a raging fury in his heart. During the last few months that crafty face had seemed always to come between Marian and himself. Sometimes it had even made its appearance in reality, when Eric was visiting her on his stated evening. On two such occasions the door of the room in which they were sitting had opened and Lerman's face had looked in only to vanish with an apology, but the danger of a recurrence of the intrusion had left behind it a sense of disquietude, which had marred the pleasure of what little time Eric was allowed to spend in her company.

It was nearly ten o'clock when he made his way to the Club in the hope that the society of his fellows might help to soothe the anger that was boiling within him. As he entered the smoke-room four men were sitting in a group, one talking and the others listening with signs of amusement on their faces. They were the pariahs of the Club, the sort of men who kept very much to themselves, simply because no one else would have anything to do with them. The speaker was in the middle of a yarn, which seemed to afford both him and his hearers considerable satisfaction, and the words arrested Eric's attention and transfixed him where he was.

"And the way she fools that great baby, Rankin, is too funny. She's a demure one is Miss Barclay, but there isn't much she doesn't know. It was only last week, the day after he had been to see her, that she said to me, 'What do you think that big silly said to me last——' But at that point Maurice Lerman stopped dead, for he suddenly became aware of Eric Rankin standing there with a look in his eyes that sent a shudder down his spine.

Eric strode over to him and said in a strangely

quiet tone, "I don't wish to interrupt your interesting story, but after you have finished there are one or two things I should like to say to you outside." After which he sat down at a table a short distance away and calmly lit his pipe.

One half-hour after another passed, and still he sat on without even a glance at the man and his companions. Lerman had tried to appear as though he did not care, but his laugh was a forced one, and as time went on and Eric made no move to leave the Club he began to grow uneasy and to show it. The clock struck twelve and the other men suggested that they should be going. They all rose to their feet and Eric did likewise, upon which Lerman said he would stay a bit longer as he wanted to see the papers, so Eric sat down again. Upon that Lerman walked hastily out and joined his friends, only to find that Eric was close upon his heels.

It was a case of four to one, but the other fellows had heard of Rankin's prowess as an athlete, and had no fancy for being inveigled into an encounter with him, especially as their habits of life were not such as to conduce to staying powers. When therefore Eric turned to them and said, "This is Mr Lerman's and my affair, so I will say good night," they departed, only too thankful to be clear of the matter.

Eric took Lerman by the arm with a grip there was no resisting and led him to a quiet spot near the park. "Now," he said, "you will tell me the story you were recounting to your friends."

Lerman cringed before him. "It was only a bit of fun. I did not mean anything by it."

"You call it fun, do you?" Eric said, and there was a hard tone in his voice that made the man who was in his grip wince still more. "Once

before you spoke insultingly of Miss Barclay, when you were a guest at Dagleish's, and I said afterwards that a man who spoke of a girl in such terms ought to be thrashed. This time I am going to make my words good." A resounding smack on the side of the head nearly knocked Lerman over, and would have done so had it not been counter-balanced by one of equal force on the opposite side, and for the next couple of minutes the speaker of evil had a bad time of it. Eric had not meant to injure him, only to give him a fright and a much-needed lesson, but a sharp kick which he received on the shin made him lose control of himself. Hitherto he had been hitting with the flat hand only, but now a fist was suddenly clenched, a huge muscular arm swung round like a steam hammer, and a crashing blow between the eyes sent Lerman to the ground, where he lay without a sign of life.

A deadly sense of sickness took hold of Eric, and during the next second or two thoughts too terrible to contemplate rushed through his mind. Was the man dead? and at the very possibility of such a thing his head seemed to whirl, and the dread inexorable majesty of the law seemed already to be holding him in its relentless grip. He saw himself being conducted between two officers once more, not into a police court to be tried for a boyish frolic, but before a greater tribunal, to stand his trial for one of the gravest offences of which a man can be guilty.

It lasted only a second perhaps, and then he bent down over the prostrate man. There was no sign of breathing, and when he tore open the waistcoat and shirt he could not tell whether what he felt within was the beating of the man's heart or that of his own throbbing pulses. He rubbed his hand

vigorously over the chest and used artificial respiration, at which he was fortunately an adept, but it seemed an eternity before, to his intense relief, the unconscious man gave a sigh, and his eyelids flickered. A few minutes later he opened his eyes and in a dazed manner inquired where he was. Then he tried to sit up, only to sink back with a groan as a sharp pain in the back of his shoulder stabbed him.

At that moment the sound of wheels was heard at the end of the road, and Eric ran towards it and shouted to the driver to stop. Fortunately it was an empty cab, and Eric placed the injured man inside, giving the cabman the address of Lerman's lodgings. As Lerman was unable to sit up Eric nursed him like a baby, and as he did so a great wave of pity for the half-conscious form within his arms swept over him. When they reached the house he carried him upstairs and laid him on the bed, and then sent the man for Dr Miller. That cabby asked no questions. If two gents like to have a bit of a scrap, what business was it of his? He was an Irishman. His sentiments were further enhanced by the half-sovereign which Eric shoved into his hand.

Miller arrived soon and made a careful examination of the patient, after which he prescribed for him and made arrangements for his comfort during the night. Eric would have stayed with him, but the doctor forbade it. "It would not be good for the patient," he said, "and, anyway, you are not fit to sit up; you would be off your head with anxiety before morning."

When they got outside Eric inquired feverishly of Miller what he thought of it.

The doctor was guarded in his reply. "He has got a nasty blow at the back of the head,

where he fell," he said. "I can find no fracture, but I shall be able to speak positively in a few days. Still, don't worry too much," he added, as he saw the look of consternation on Eric's face. "He will be all right I fully expect."

The night was the longest Eric ever spent in his life, and time after time he looked at his watch, until at last he could not stay in bed, so got up and dressed. At seven o'clock he went out and roused Miller, and together they set off to see how the patient was getting on. They were both relieved to find him conscious, though in pain. In reply to their inquiries he expressed himself as feeling better. After Miller had finished his work Lerman said that he would like to speak with Rankin alone. As Miller left the room Eric said, "I am very sorry about this, for I had no intention of carrying things to such a pitch." Lerman replied, "Quite so, but it was not that I wished to speak about. I only wanted to ask you not to say anything of this to Mr Barclay. I will explain to him myself."

"As you wish," Eric said, and in response to Lerman's polite good morning went down to join Miller, and to hear what he now thought of the patient's prospects.

"Well, of course," Miller replied, "his condition this morning is very satisfactory, and that is so much to the good, and if the next three days pass without any complications he will be safe." So for three days, which might have been years, Eric had to wait, until Miller was able to assure him at last that the risk of danger was over.

In obedience to Lerman's wishes he said nothing about the events of the evening to Mr Barclay, although he was at a loss to account for this fellow's motives in making the request. The fact was that

Lerman, while recognising this as a fine opportunity of lowering Eric in Mr Barclay's eyes and of making his own position more secure, had sufficient experience of women to know that he would cut a sorry figure in Marian's estimation, besides offending her beyond hope of pardon, if she heard of those words of his which had brought about this cataclysm.

It was only after Eric had left that Lerman suddenly remembered that he had made a terrible slip in not including Miss Barclay in the request for silence which he had imposed upon Eric. He little thought that he was paying Eric the highest of compliments in feeling assured that if he had extracted the promise it would have been faithfully kept. It was too late to call him back, however, and Lerman had to be content with sending Mr Barclay a note to say that he could not come to the office as he had been attacked by a gang of hooligans on his way home on the previous night.

He need not have worried as to anything that Eric might say to Miss Barclay. Rankin was not ashamed of his part in the evening's adventures, but he was far too good a sportsman to take a mean advantage, for such he regarded it, of a rival, and he never discussed the subject with Marian except in the most general terms. In fact his opinion of Lerman had rather gone up than otherwise, for, as he said to Miller as they left the sick-room on the morning after the encounter, "The chap must have some good in him; he takes his thrashing in a sporting way anyhow."

He had little thought when he returned Lerman's polite good morning that, as he left the room, a face contorted with passion and malice had glared at him from the bed, and that, as soon as the door had closed behind him, a voice vibrating with

hatred had hissed through clenched teeth, "Wait till I get my chance, then I will have my revenge."

There are forms of revenge more deadly than bodily harm, and Lerman's mind was of the type that is all the more venomous for having to wait.

CHAPTER XIII

THE CALL OF THE EAST

HENCEFORWARD Marian and Eric were to encounter something infinitely more perilous to their matrimonial prospects than Mr Barclay's opposition. Plain outstanding obstacles are trifles compared with the dangers from a lurking foe, which is all the more insidious because it is hidden from the sight. And these two lovers were treading a path which was soon to be beset by many entanglements, yet treading it absolutely unconscious of the troubles that lay ahead of them.

It was just when they most needed to be close to one another that an incident occurred which had a profound influence on their lives. It was nothing pernicious in itself, but it took the man along another path, and when the girl came face to face with danger he was out of earshot and could not come to her assistance.

In other words Dick Marshall appeared on the scene. In justice to that individual and in case the reader should form the hasty conclusion that he stole away Marian's love for Eric, we may say at once that he did nothing of the sort, and that he turned out to be Eric's best friend in the long-run. All that he did was done in the most guileless manner, and neither he nor anyone else could have foreseen the consequences of it.

It was while walking along one evening that Eric met his friend, Jim Sanderson, accompanied by a

stranger. Sanderson stopped and said, "Rankin, let me introduce Marshall to you."

Eric shook hands with Marshall—a lean, well-knit fellow of about thirty years of age, with a face tanned to the hue of mahogany—and said he was pleased to meet him. Sanderson said that they were going to his house to spend the evening, and suggested that Eric should join them. On the way he explained that Marshall was in the Woods' and Forests' Department in Burma, and had been home for six months on leave, and was now spending the last few weeks of his furlough with a friend in Glasgow.

On arriving at the house they adjourned to Jim's sanctum, a cosy room set apart for his use, where he was in the habit of entertaining his friends.

They settled themselves in their lounge-chairs, and Eric and Jim lit their pipes; Marshall pulled out his cheroot case and offered it to the others, but they shook their heads when they saw the blackness of its contents. "Bit too strong," they both remarked. Marshall, however, lit one and was soon puffing away to his heart's content.

"Now, Dick, talk," Sanderson commanded. "He's a travel magazine and a book of exploration and a six-shilling novel rolled into one," he explained to Eric, "but he's so confoundedly modest."

By judicious questions here and there they got him started, and soon he was in full swing.

"Let us see," said Sanderson; "where is Burma?"

"On the farther side of India," Marshall replied, "next to Siam and China."

"And what sort of work do you do?"

"We look after the teak forests. You see, we have to ring all the trees that are ready for cutting,

and the next year those trees are cut down and the following year new ones are planted in their places, so you can see that, as these forests are hundreds of miles long, there is a good deal to do."

"What sort of Johnnies are the niggers?" asked Sanderson.

"There's where you make the mistake," Marshall said. "They are not niggers at all, but refined, aristocratic-looking people, with complexions like the Italians and beautiful dark eyes, just like those of a fawn. They have the most delightful manners, too; kindness and politeness are their chief characteristics, and you never hear a rude word from one of them, not even the poorest.

"I say poorest," he went on, "but there is no real poverty, for they live in huts, picturesque little shanties made of bamboo and covered with flowering creepers, orchids, and all sorts of lovely blooms, and it costs practically nothing to build them. Their villages are idyllic little spots with the old-fashioned well in the centre, and palms and all kinds of trees and bushes, which are a blaze of wonderful colours, scattered about, and each village is surrounded by a high palisade to keep the tigers and the dacoits out.

"They can live on four annas a week—that is about fourpence, you know—as they only eat curry and rice, and both of them are as cheap as dirt.

"Altogether, I should call them the happiest people on the face of the earth; they never seem to have any cares; no housekeeping bills to meet or rent-days, and they never worry about the future. If they make a bit of money they spend it on dress or make a present to one of the pagodas, or give a feast to their neighbour, or get rid of it

in some way or other; so that if there are no poor people there are no rich ones either. They are delightfully hospitable, and it is a treat to go into one of their huts and see them *en famille*. Of course they have none of the cruelties of the Hindus, and they make a tremendous fuss over their children, and like you to do the same, and they look after their old people as well as we do here; in fact better if anything.

"By-the-bye," he continued, "you are liable to make a curious mistake at first if you are not careful, for it is sometimes a puzzle to tell which is the husband and which is the wife, for they are both dressed alike, with a sort of blouse and a skirt—a *lungyi* as they call it—and both have long black hair coiled up in a bob at the top of the head. The women wear much longer *lungyis* than the men, and generally have a flower stuck in their hair instead of the scarf which the men use as head-gear. Their clothes are made of hand-spun silk, and are extremely pretty and graceful, and it is a sight to see a number of them about—they look like a crowd of butterflies on a summer's day; and it is always summer there, for except during the rains, which last from May to October, it is a case of clear skies and sunshine from morning to night, and night is even more beautiful than day, for the air is full of fireflies of all the colours of the rainbow, flitting about in all directions."

"What about their marriage ceremonies?" inquired Eric, whose thoughts naturally ran in this direction.

"Well, you see," answered Marshall, "they have no ceremony to speak of. A man and woman, or it is usually a boy and girl, arrange between themselves to be married, and by so doing they become man and wife. It sounds a loose

arrangement, but in reality it is anything but that, for they cannot separate except by mutual consent, and in that case the husband has to give the wife half of all his worldly goods. In regard to the marriage itself they often have a feast, and the bride and bridegroom have a silk ribbon tied round them both and then eat out of the same dish; but it is only a picturesque adjunct, and no more necessary to the tying-up than the brides cake at a wedding here.

"After they are married the woman has the best of it, for she most effectually bosses the show. The women have much more go in them than the men, and do the weaving and manage the stalls at the bazaar, while the men do the washing and cooking. Talk of women's rights! It is a case of looking after men's rights out there, for the women have all the liberty they could possibly wish, even to the extent of proposing to a man if they take a fancy to him; and yet they are the most charming, modest little creatures you could possibly imagine. I don't believe there are such fascinating girls anywhere else in the world." With which sentiment Eric strongly disagreed.

"What sort of religion do they go in for?" Sanderson asked.

"They are all Buddhists," Marshall replied, "and worship at pagodas. These pagodas are solid structures, shaped like a hand-bell, and every pagoda has a temple close to it. You see these buildings all over the land; one at least in every village, and lots of them scattered through the jungle and on the top of every hill. Some of them are quite small, and some are hundreds of feet high; and there is always something very mysterious and beautiful about them, and they add a wonderful charm to the whole country.

"But I've been gassing most awfully," he apologised. "By Jove! it's one o'clock."

"What if it is?" said Eric, who had been listening in a perfect ecstasy all the time; "go on, man, don't stop."

But Marshall said he had a conscience somewhere inside him, and must rush off and give his host a chance to get to bed.

"If you really care about this sort of thing," he said to Eric, "come up to Grant's, that is the man I am staying with, and we'll have another crack to-morrow."

Just for a moment Eric hesitated. To-morrow was Thursday, the one evening in the week that Mr Barclay had told Eric he might consider himself free to come in.

"I have an engagement," he said, "and should be a bit late."

"That would not matter," Marshall said. "Grant goes off to bed when he wants to do so, and leaves me free of the house. Can you manage it by half-past nine?"

The offer was tempting, and, as Eric said to himself, Marian surely would not mind, just for this once.

He went home and to bed, but not to sleep. All that he had heard had inspired him in a way that many of us can perhaps hardly understand. For two years he had suppressed his love for art, and to-night his imagination had burst its bounds and flooded his whole nature. During this period he had touched neither pencil or brush, and this evening he had been painting pictures, infinitely more seductive than any the hand could draw, the indelible, glowing pictures which the imagination paints on the delicate canvas of the brain.

If anyone had suggested to Eric Rankin, as he

was making his way to the Barclay's house on the following evening, that he was going there in a different frame of mind from that in which he had done hitherto, he would have flatly contradicted the idea. Yet if he had stopped to analyse his feelings he would have been bound to acknowledge that his attention was more occupied with all that he had listened to on the previous evening than with any thoughts of the girl who was awaiting his coming.

Half an hour later, as they sat in the garden, for the August evening was nearly as hot as the day had been, and the house was almost unbearable, Marian could not fail to be struck by some indefinable change that had come over her lover. An engaged girl who has any sense is glad enough that her fiancé should be interested in different matters, but she does not care to see his mind engrossed by any of them to the exclusion of herself and her affairs.

On this particular evening Marian had had several matters that she specially wished to talk about. Perhaps they were really not vitally important, and most certainly they would not be so to the reader, but to her they were everything, and on any previous occasion would have been so to Eric also. Yet no sooner were they seated in their basket-chairs, and she had started a topic, than somehow or other he had changed the subject and was telling her all about Marshall and that wondrous Eastern land which had taken such a tremendous hold on his imagination.

He told his story well, vastly better, in fact, than Marshall had done, for Eric was able to colour his descriptions with all the warmth of an artist's perceptions, and Marian could not but be fascinated by the account which he gave her of his

newly found El Dorado. Yet as the evening went by she longed for a little attention on her own account; she had told him, only a week or two before, that he kissed her so much that he had never any time for talking, but to-night it was the other way round, and the kisses were few and far between. She was an absolutely unselfish girl, however, and would not upbraid him, but it was a disappointment to her when, at half-past nine, he asked her, somewhat shamefacedly be it observed, if she would excuse him if he left earlier than usual, as he had promised to look in and see Marshall.

Unselfish as she was she had some spirit in her, and said she would not detain him on any account. The tone of her voice, which was frigidly polite, made him uncomfortable, and he would have sat down again and stayed on, but she foresaw this and took care not to give him the chance.

As he walked away from the house he felt that he had made a mistake, and would have given anything to have been able to undo it, and he said to himself that he would take precious good care that it should not happen again.

A couple of hours later he was thinking neither of his mistake nor of the girl he loved, for he was drinking in feverishly every word that Marshall was saying. If he had been impressed on the previous night, on this occasion he was simply transported. A good listener makes a good speaker, and Marshall, who was a reserved man as a rule, and rarely spoke of his own achievements, had been carried away by Eric's eagerness, and had regaled him with a thrilling account of jungle life. The deep, dark mysteries of the forest; the glories of the tropic day, and the beauties of the tropic night; encounters with lurk-

ing foes, animal and human alike: tigers and dacoits, wild buffaloes, snakes, and all the creeping horrors of the undergrowth; and many other things, on the other hand, exquisitely fair and lovely: butterflies and orchids of incredible size and colouring, and all the wealth and profusion of verdure and insect life; in short, all the romance and tragedy of the jungle he portrayed with a skill that would never have been his had it not been for that pair of glowing eyes that gazed at him with such intensity.

And while they thus faced each other, the one talking and the other listening, a girl was lying in her dainty bed staring into the darkness with wide-open eyes, wondering—wondering—wondering.

CHAPTER XIV

SHIPS IN A MIST

ON a damp, chilly day in October Eric Rankin had to go down to the ship-repairing yard on a matter of business. When he had completed his errand he stood for a few minutes looking out over the water, and his expression was that of a man whose thoughts are elsewhere.

Suddenly he heard the hoot of a siren, and as he glanced round he saw, through the drizzling rain, a steamer passing down the river. As she came nearer he read the name *Amarapoora* on her bow, and at that he gave a start, and a look of fierce and intense longing came over his face.

Ever since his talks with Marshall he had been in a restless and preoccupied state of mind. Sometimes in the middle of a conversation he would suddenly look away, as though someone had beckoned to him or had called him by his name. He was obsessed by the pictures of the Golden East which Marshall's descriptions and stories had conjured up in his brain, and he had dwelt upon them until they had become a part of his very being, more real to him, in fact, than the surroundings in which he was living.

Even Marian had noticed this change in him. Not that he was neglectful of her, for since the night when he had slighted her, as he came to consider it afterwards, by his anxiety to rejoin Marshall, he had been even more considerate and attentive to her than before. Yet sometimes in

the midst of their conversation the look of restlessness would come over him, and before many minutes had passed he would be dilating upon all the marvels of that mysterious country which had aroused his deepest interest.

To-day, as he stood by the side of the river, he was almost oblivious of what was in front of him, and was gazing as if in a vision over a land of temples and pagodas and quaint native villages in which a human kaleidoscope of moving colours passed to and fro beneath waving palm trees, and amid a flood of dazzling sunshine. Then it was that the steamer's hoot recalled him to himself, and when he saw that it was the *Amarapoora* on her way to Rangoon, he was stabbed with a pang of jealousy at the thought that all aboard of her were journeying to the land of his dreams.

His artistic yearnings, so long repressed, had found vent in his imagery of Eastern life and scenery. Eric Rankin had received another call, greater than art, stronger than love, the strange, mysterious Call of the East, which no man can withstand once it comes to him, struggle as he may. Perhaps it is that we all, in the person of our remote ancestors, came at the first from that part of the world, and the East, in her undying jealousy, calls one of us back, and when she does so she beckons with a gesture which will not be denied.

He had fought against this fantasy with all his might, fearful lest it should interfere with his love for Marian, but, in spite of all his efforts, his longing had become a mad desire, and at last had concentrated itself into an irresistible impulse.

That evening, as soon as dinner was over, he left the house and made his way to Miller's house.

"Well, old chap, how are you getting on?"

he said, as he entered the doctor's consulting room.

"First-rate," Miller replied with much cheerfulness. "I've had two patients in this evening. The first was a lady, a real live lady, quite a classy party I can tell you. She talked for ten minutes and then told me she had called for a subscription in aid of their mothers' meeting; the second was a "drunk" who had injured his eye. His employers deny any liability, as he did not receive the injury while at work; the police refuse to remunerate me because it was someone outside the force who brought him; and the man declines to pay as he says he never wanted any blooming doctor."

"Oh well, you have got a third patient now; a lunatic this time," Eric said.

"Nothing like variety for gaining experience," Miller remarked; "who is the patient?"

"I am," Eric replied.

"Then you are the first lunatic I ever came across who recognised himself as such. They usually think themselves the only sane people living. And in what particular direction are you mad?"

So Eric told him the whole story.

Miller did not laugh at him or pooh-pooh the matter. He saw at once that it was a condition requiring careful attention. After deliberating for a while he turned to Eric and said:

"You are not mad, needless to say, any more than a man who falls in love and finds himself thinking and acting in a very different way from what he has ever done before. Love is not the only thing either which is apt to upset a man's equilibrium. About ten years ago, at the time of the Egyptian war, I knew a man who was

suddenly seized with a wild desire to go out to the seat of action. He was one of the quietest and most reserved of men, the last person one would have thought of being taken that way, but he gave up a good billet and set off; he returned in three months quite cured. There is no accounting for these impulses, which set up a sort of brain-storm, and as a rule the best thing a man can do when he is attacked in this way is to go and satisfy his imagination with a dash of the real thing."

"As to yourself," he continued, "you might get over it of course if you were to stay at home, but it would be shorter and vastly better for yourself and everybody else if you were to take a trip out East. You would return a wiser and perhaps a sadder man."

Eric shook his head. "My father would never consent to it; he would regard it as more pernicious than art itself. He is a dear old chap, but he and I are built on different lines, and he would never understand."

Miller pondered over this, and at last he said with emphasis, "Well, we must make a try, at any rate. I will see what I can do with him."

He did not need to exert his influence with Mr Rankin, however, for the matter was taken out of his hands before he had an opportunity of seeing him, and the suggestion which led that good man to send his son for a trip to Burma came from the very last person one would have thought of.

Eric's distraction had been common talk among his friends at the Club. One of the men voiced the general sentiment when he said, "I can't make out what has come over Rankin of late; he seems to have lost his spirit. He has never been

the same since he met that man Marshall. I believe he has got the East on the brain."

The words caught the ears of Lerman, who was present, and when he went home that night he sat for a long time by the fire pondering over them. As a result of his cogitations he made an excuse to see Mr Rankin next day on a question of business. As he was leaving he said:

"I am sorry to see your son so depressed and out of sorts nowadays."

Mr Rankin, who did not like Lerman, was guarded in his reply.

"He is not quite himself, perhaps, but it is nothing much."

"He makes light of it to you, I am afraid, sir," Lerman replied, "but the rest of us have noticed a great change in him, and he is getting worse, too, the last few weeks. You will not mention of course that I have said anything to you about it, as Eric would not like to think that we had noticed any difference in him, but as a friend let me say that he is simply dying to see the East, and the only way to save him from a complete breakdown is for you to send him out to Rangoon for a few months. You could make an excuse to send him on business, and I assure you that it would be the very best thing for him. I know that it is little short of impertinence on my part to speak of this to you, but you must overlook that, for it is purely my anxiety on his behalf that has led me to say anything about it. He is such a thoroughly good sort, and we are all so fond of him," he added a moment or two later; "and as I have said so much I might as well tell you that Mr Barclay is treating him very badly, and it makes my blood boil sometimes to witness the petty annoyances he inflicts on him. You may

hardly believe it, but on several occasions he has actually asked me to the house on the very evenings he had set apart for Eric to visit Miss Barclay. It has made it very uncomfortable for him, and for me too, I need hardly say."

With that he departed, leaving Mr Rankin full of gratitude for the consideration he had shown towards his son, and reproaching himself for the dislike he had hitherto felt towards this kindly disposed young man.

"It just shows," he reflected, "how careful we ought to be in forming our judgments, and especially in estimating anyone by what other people may have said about them."

The kindly disposed young man was meanwhile making his way back to his office, and the first thing he did on arriving there was to interview his employer.

"I hope you won't think me officious, sir," he said, "but there is a matter that I feel it my duty to speak to you about."

"Say it by all means, Maurice, if you think it is anything I ought to know," Mr Barclay said.

"It is something you ought very much to know. It would be ungrateful of me, considering all the kindness you have shown me, if I did not warn you. It is about your daughter and young Rankin. You know that I am the last person to be guilty of eavesdropping, especially in your house, but from various things that have forced themselves on my notice I have a strong suspicion that they are thinking of being married in secret. You had better not tax them with it, or I feel sure that you would precipitate matters. A much better plan would be to get Rankin away for a time. He is most anxious to go out to Burma,

and in connection with that I have a confession to make. I took the liberty of putting in a word on the subject with his father, and from his manner I am inclined to think he will send him as soon as arrangements can be made. From what I know of the country—for I spent a few weeks there during my tour round the world—I am also inclined to think that he won't be in any hurry to come back."

The more Mr Barclay thought over this suggestion the more it appealed to him. There were two points on which he felt very gratified. The first was that Rankin would be out of the way for some months at least, and leave a clear field for Lerman. The second was that his estimate of the last-named young man had turned out correct.

What a lot of trouble and discussion it would save if women would only be guided by the opinions of their male relatives!

Four days passed, and nothing transpired. Then one evening Mr Barclay arrived for dinner accompanied by Lerman. They went into the drawing-room together and found Mrs Barclay and Marian sitting by the fire, and by the expression on their faces it would seem that something had occurred to worry them. When they were all seated Mrs Barclay turned to her husband, and, with the shrinking manner of one who is not sure how her news will be received, said:

"Eric has been here and tells us that he is going out to Rangoon on business for his father."

"Good thing for him, too," said her husband.

The other two occupants of the room said nothing. One was a girl who sat staring into the fire with wide-open, sorrowful eyes; the other was a young man whose reflections were scarcely suit-

able for words under the circumstances, for the thought that instantly flashed through his mind was:

“At last my chance has come; now I shall have my revenge.”

CHAPTER XV

A LAST FAREWELL

WHEN Mr Rankin was left alone after his conversation with Lerman, he sat down and faced the situation. The problem in his mind was as to whether such a trip would unsettle Eric still more, or whether it would reconcile him to his work. The pros and cons balanced themselves so evenly that at last he rose from his seat and went out to find his friend Mr Gilmour, and ask his opinion.

After he had stated all the facts of the case, Mr Gilmour, without any hesitation, exclaimed, "Send the laddie out there by all means. Once he has seen the greasy natives and been bitten by the mosquitoes he will be glad enough to come home and settle down for good." So that settled the matter, and it was decided that he should sail by the next steamer, which was due to leave in about three weeks' time.

We may observe in passing that the advice, although it turned the scale, was woefully inaccurate in two particulars. Mr Gilmour had overlooked the circumstances that the natives of Burma are not greasy, and that mosquitoes are not prevalent in the cool season.

Eric had been away all day on business, a fact which Lerman had been aware of, as otherwise he would not have chosen that particular day in which to interview Mr Rankin, consequently it was not until dinner-time that he and his father met. At

the conclusion of that meal Mr Rankin said that he wished to speak to him in the library.

"I wish you to go out to Rangoon for me on business," he said, in much the same tone of voice as that in which he would have told him to go round to an office in an adjoining street. "You will sail on the fourteenth of next month."

Eric's heart seemed to stand still, then his head began to buzz, and the room swam before him. A voice which must have been his own, though he could hardly recognise it as such, replied, "Very well, father, I shall be very pleased."

"I will give you details of what I want you to do later on," Mr Rankin said; "at present you had better be getting on with your preparations."

Eric thanked him and went out of the room like a man walking in his sleep, and wondered if he should wake up to find it was all a dream. He told his sisters the astonishing news, and then set off to see Miller. He found the doctor reclining in an easy chair, engaged in what he termed "resting after the arduous labours of the day," and informed him what had happened.

Miller responded by sitting bolt upright and saying, "Well, I'm blowed!" three times in succession, with a long pause between each.

After that all was bustle in the Rankin household. The first part of the voyage being cold, the latter part hot, and the land of his destination hotter still, even in the so-called cool season, a variety of accessories were needed, from thick overcoats to a sun-helmet.

"You men poke fun enough at a girl's trousseau," Janet said to Miller, "but, if you ask me, a man's outfit beats it hollow."

As for the centre figure of all this activity, his friends scarcely knew him. His eyes became

bright and keen, his face shone with animation, and his whole nature seemed suddenly to have expanded. He did not wait for the customary Thursday evening to see Marian and tell her of his good-fortune, but called within the next hour.

As he stood by the fireside, with glowing eyes and head erect, she felt marvellously proud of her handsome lover. With rare unselfishness she entered into his plans with a zeal almost equal to his own, though in her heart of hearts she was longing to hear him say one thing—that he would be sorry to leave her. Underneath it all she was sad at the thought that he would be so far from her. It was the old story over again: the man goes away, flushed with the excitement of his going, and the woman can only stay behind and weep.

Just as he was in the full tide of all that he meant to do and see, he was struck by a look of something like pain in her eyes, and it cut his narrative short.

Sitting down beside her, he put his arm round her waist, and in tender, lover-like tones said, "But whatever shall I do without you, Marian?" The words were like an anodyne to her aching heart, and she contentedly leaned her head against him. As he gazed into her face he felt that no magic of the East could ever hold him in so potent a spell as the glamour of the sweet blue eyes that looked up into his.

Had the projected tour been of his own ordering he would have countermanded it there and then he told himself; but that was impossible of course. Then for one mad moment an idea flashed through his mind which, if carried out, would have caused Mr Lerman to suffer from a mixture of feelings—vexation, in that it would lose him for

ever the chance of winning Miss Barclay and her fortune; satisfaction, in that it would show her father that his warnings had come true after all.

"To take her with me as my wife," had been Eric's unspoken thought in that tumultuous moment.

The moment had passed, and the notion with it, but perhaps it would not have been amiss had he put it into execution.

There were many good-byes to be said; among others those to his friends at the Club. The good-hearted fellows congratulated him and wished they were going too, and gave him a first-rate send-off when he left the Club the last night but one before he was due to sail. There was only one blot on the evening's enjoyment, and that was the presence of Lerman, whose protestations of regret at losing Eric's company were slightly overdone, especially as it was the first time they had met since his recovery from his injuries.

So soon as he was able to speak to Eric alone, he pulled an unsealed envelope out of his pocket and offering it to him said:

"This is a note of introduction to Mr and Mrs Watson, whom I met in Rangoon when I spent a few weeks there on my trip round the world. They are delightful people, and most hospitable, and you will be fortunate in having such good friends."

Eric took the note, which he could not well refuse, but speedily made up his mind that he would not avail himself of it, when his intentions in this direction were checkmated by Lerman's next words, as he added:

"I have written to him as well, and told him the date of your arrival, so that you are sure to hear from or see him as soon as you get there."

One circumstance Lerman did not mention, namely that he had written to Mr Watson's daughter at the same time. The letter not being a lengthy one, we may give it *in extenso*.

"MY DEAR BLANCHE,—I must begin with an apology for not having written for so long, and for having left your last two letters unanswered. My prospects, however, were and still are not such as to warrant me in keeping up a correspondence. Now I am going to make amends for the way I have treated you. There is a young fellow called Rankin coming out to Rangoon, and I have given him a letter of introduction to your father. He has good looks and will come into pots of money. So take the good things the gods are sending you, and forgive and forget

"Your erstwhile and unworthy lover,

"MAURICE LERMAN."

It is always well to kill two birds with one stone when opportunity offers.

There is a period of quiescence immediately preceding a long voyage, when the active preparations of days or weeks, culminating in the all-important process of packing, are suddenly brought to a standstill. In the pause that ensues the traveller's mind, which has been busily occupied with arrangements and forethought, finding its services no longer required in these directions, instinctively turns to what it is leaving behind.

For three weeks Eric had had little time for thinking of anything except the hundred and one personal and business matters that required his attention. He was to sail early on the Saturday, and when he had finished his breakfast on the Friday morning, and seen all his heavy luggage dispatched, he felt as though he scarcely knew

what to do with himself. The excitement had suddenly subsided, and in the lull which had fallen over the proceedings his mind was in a curiously divided state. The East was still calling him with as insistent a voice as before, and the face of the girl he loved was dearer to him than ever, and the thought of saying farewell was harder than he had imagined it would be.

It had been arranged that he was to call at the Barclay's in the afternoon, as that time would afford a better chance of an uninterrupted *tête-à-tête* than if they postponed it until the evening. As the morning crawled by he felt more and more the pang of parting from her.

It would be only for four or five months, he said to himself, but he felt in his heart that it might turn out to be years. In one way perhaps it did turn out so. Time cannot always be measured by the calendar.

Punctually at four o'clock he rang at the door of the Barclay's house, and was shown into the same room as that in which he had found her curled up by the fire on the occasion of his first visit. This time she was standing ready to receive him, and when he took her hand in his he could scarcely release it again.

They had tea, at which Mrs Barclay joined them, but after it was over she made an excuse to leave, saying that she had some shopping to do. As a matter of fact she had none, but she made some, which answered her purpose of giving the lovers a chance of being by themselves.

After she had left they sat down on the couch to have their last talk together. Singularly enough it was the girl this time who talked about the East and all that he was going to see, and the man who would speak only of what he was parting from.

Once before, only three weeks past, she had longed to hear him say he was sorry to leave her; now he would talk of nothing else.

The clock struck six, and they might be interrupted at any minute, so he rose to say his last good-bye. He took her once more in his arms and wished with all his heart that he was not going away. The sweet, oval face with the trusting blue eyes had obliterated all his visions of the calling East. But was the seductive fascination of the East to obliterate that face from his memory? That was the point, though it did not occur to either of them at that bitter-sweet moment.

She was wearing some flowers in her dress, and he gently removed them.

"I will take these in remembrance of you, dearest," he said, "and will put them between the leaves of my diary."

She looked up at him with a loving, trustful smile. "Yes, and if you fall in love with one of those pretty Burmese girls they will remind you of your old love at home."

Which they undoubtedly would have done had it not turned out that just when they might have proved useful they were lying, with the rest of his belongings, in a left-luggage office a hundred miles away.

CHAPTER XVI

THE PORTALS OF THE EAST

THE November day was bitterly raw and cold as the *Martaban* swung out into the river, and the crowd of passengers, who had just embarked, proceeded to settle down in their new quarters. A cheerless day, one would think, on which to start a voyage. Yet, so far from this being the case, the weather seemed to have the opposite effect, for everyone consoled themselves with congratulations that they were escaping from this detestable fog and rain, and with the welcome thought of the perpetual sunshine, day by day, that awaited them at the end of their journey.

It was a jovial company therefore that sat round the fire in the first-class saloon, and high spirits and good fellowship were its predominant features. Even those of its number who were returning to their work in that far-off land, and had years of absence from the land of their birth to look forward to, seemed determined to make the best of it and to help their neighbours to do the same.

There was one among them, however, who did not need cheering up, and that was the young fellow to whom this trip meant the realisation of his fondest ambitions. Before the ship left the mouth of the river Eric was on good terms with the other passengers, and was just regaling them with an excellent story, when suddenly an uproar was heard in the adjacent alleyway.

The last person to join the ship had been a

Major of a somewhat irascible temperament, the result, in all probability, of a prolonged residence in tropical climes. The Major's voice was heard bawling for the steward, and a few moments later the Major's face, of a decidedly apoplectic hue, was seen peering into the saloon. The steward, coming along at that minute, was met by a perfect onslaught on the part of the military man, who demanded, in the fiercest of tones, to know what on earth he meant by putting him in the same cabin with a lady.

"I don't understand, sir," the steward respectfully said.

"Understand!" answered the Major. "No, and neither do I. You told me that the number of my cabin was eighteen, and when I entered it to get my things in order I found a foreign lady sitting in front of the looking-glass doing her hair."

"Beg pardon, sir," the steward said, "but that is not a lady. It is Mr Oom-bo-da, a Burmese gentleman, who has been over here for a year, learning English."

"H'm," snorted the Major; "and do you think I am going to live in the same cabin with a dirty native?"

Upon which, followed by the steward, he indignantly stumped his way to the aforesaid cabin, where he could still be heard thundering out his protests.

Eric rose from his chair, and walked along the alleyway until he found himself outside the state-room, whence the noise proceeded, and looking in through the doorway witnessed a sight of which, for the sake of his countrymen, he felt heartily ashamed.

The Major was hurling offensive epithets and

glaring fiercely at a young native, who was in Eastern costume, with his jet-black hair coiled on the top of his head. What impressed Eric most was the look of quiet dignity on the young man's countenance, and the calm disdain with which, in spite of the fact that he was flinching at the insults which were being heaped upon him, he refused to make any reply.

Eric recalled Marshall's words as to the innate courtesy and refinement of the race to which Oom-bo-da belonged, and his ready sympathies went out to him. The Major had insisted on the Burman being turned out of his cabin or on another berth being found for himself, but the ship was full and no other accommodation was available. In Eric's case, however, an unusual favour had been offered by the Manager, who was anxious, for business reasons, to secure the goodwill of the greatest shipper in Glasgow, and consequently the son had been given a first-class cabin to himself.

"Look here," said Eric to the steward, "take this *gentleman's* (with a just perceptible emphasis on the word) luggage to my berth and bring mine in here. I will share these quarters with Mr Oom-bo-da."

The Major at once became as meek as a lamb, and would have protested, with an apology, but a look on the face of this commanding young Hercules warned him that he had better do as he was told, and the exchange was speedily effected.

This kindly action had its due reward, for soon these two, who belonged to different hemispheres and had been brought-up in such widely separated worlds of thought, were talking together like brothers, and Eric felt as though he had, even at this early stage of his travels, come into contact

with that East for which his soul so ardently longed.

Oom-bo-da could speak very fair English, but before long Eric made him say some words in Burmese, and by the time they came in sight of Liverpool, where they were due to call on their way out, he was determined to learn the language. Hence his first action after breakfast next morning was to proceed to one of the large stores, where you can buy anything requisite for foreign travel, from topees to tinned soup, and purchase a phrase-book.

Oom-bo-da, who according to his upbringing was only too anxious to make some return for the kindness his fellow-traveller had shown him, gave him every assistance with the pronunciation, an important point in a language where the same word may have half a dozen meanings according to the inflection. An ambitious globe-trotter once went into the bazaar at Mandalay, armed with a dictionary, and ordered four annas' worth of a certain kind of fruit, and could not understand why he was met with smiles and puzzled looks until he found out, after inquiries from someone better versed in the matter, that he had ordered four-pence worth of buffaloes.

Day after day these two spent hours in going over phrase after phrase of this most difficult language, and Eric proved himself such an apt pupil that by the time they reached Port Said he was able to make himself intelligible to his companion.

Apart from any use he might make of it eventually, it was a very pleasant way of passing the time, for the weather was so cold, even in the Mediterranean, as to make exercise on deck a duty rather than a pleasure. The only people

who did not approve of his proceedings were the lady passengers, especially the younger ones, who would gladly have had more of the society of this tall, handsome youth.

Twelve days after leaving home Eric went on deck about eleven o'clock for a walk before turning in, and saw on the horizon ahead a row of lights.

"What is that?" he asked one of the officers who had stopped to speak to him.

"That's Port Said," he replied, and Eric's heart gave a bound, for he knew that he had reached the Portals of the East.

The lights gradually drew nearer, and within an hour the steamer came to a standstill among a host of other shipping, and the first stage of the journey was at an end.

Port Said may be looked at from two points of view. Examined closely, it is the dumping-ground for the scum of two hemispheres, and contains more wickedness to the acre than any other town on the face of the earth, or at any rate did so at the time of which we are speaking.

Viewed from a distance, by an imaginative mind, it is the most mysterious and wonderful place on the globe, for it is the gateway between two worlds. On the one side "West is West"; on the other "East is East"; and though you may connect them by steamship-routes, by an unfailing postal service, and by telegraph cables, they have remained so for century after century, and will remain so, for all we can see to the contrary, so long as the world shall last.

The brilliant sunshine of the following morning was a pleasant change from the dull, cold weather through which they had been passing during the last fortnight, as the passengers all agreed when they met on deck, and by breakfast-time they were

thankful to change their winter clothing for flannel suits and muslin dresses. The morning was spent ashore while the ship was coaling, but by midday the decks had been washed down, the French pilot had taken his place on the bridge, the steamer had entered the Canal, and the West was left behind.

The decks presented an animated appearance that afternoon, for the warmth and sunshine had emptied the saloon, and the passengers were strolling up and down in couples, chatting and pointing out objects of interest in the desert that stretched on each side as far as the eye could see. Up to that time they had been sailing through a sea of waters; now they seemed to be sailing through an ocean of sand, and the warm glow was grateful to the members of the company who had been shivering in the cold of the past fortnight. Friendships were beginning to be formed, those extraordinary ship-friendships, the warmth of which is only equalled by their evanescence. The deck of a vessel is much better adapted for this purpose than the saloon, for there is more room, and consequently more opportunity for the confidential talk, which is the starting-point of every intimacy.

The desert was flaming in the flush of the sunset, and Eric Rankin was leaning over the port-rail revelling in the beauty of it, when a voice at his side made him look round.

"Lovely evening, isn't it, Mr Rankin?"

"Yes, it's very beautiful, Mrs Forsyth; and one appreciates it all the more after the cold and wet we have had."

Mrs Forsyth was a bright-eyed little woman of about twenty-eight, with an inborn faculty for making friends, especially among men. Every-

thing you told her was *so interesting*, any view you happened to point out was *too lovely*, and if you did anything for her, if it was only to hand her a cup of tea, it was *too sweet* of you. It might have almost passed for affectation had it not been for the far-away expression in her pensive, grey eyes. That far-off gaze had gained her a reputation among her acquaintances of being a dreamer, whatever that may be, and her dearest friends said they believed she was a poet. She herself knew that it enhanced her charms, and, furthermore, that she always acquired it when she was thinking of something else than what she was looking at. She had also found by experience that it afforded breathing space in which to make up her mind how to approach any subject on which she was anxious to obtain information.

Just now, as she gazed out over the desert with that look on her face, her mind was not, as might have been imagined, in a state of transport at the glories of the sunset, but was taken up with wondering how she could find out why this young fellow was going out to Burma and any other items of information she might be able to glean at the same time.

At last she managed to withdraw her vision from the stupendous, over-awing majesty of the view, and, turning to Eric, artlessly inquired:

“Have you ever been out East before?”

She had dined at the same table with him since they had left England and knew perfectly well that he had *not* been out before. Still, if you want people to tell you all about themselves, there is nothing like starting afresh, at the very beginning as it were.

“No,” Eric replied; “it is my first visit to this part of the world.”

"Then in that case," Mrs Forsyth said, "you will know hardly anyone out there. There are lots of the dearest people. The Bensons are charming, the Griersons are simply delightful, and the Arnots are awfully jolly. Mrs Arnot is simply too sweet."

It was Mrs Forsyth's habit to gush over everybody in this world except Irrawaddy pilots, and those she never mentioned. Her father had been one. But that, of course, was before he made a lucky speculation and left the cutter for an office.

"I must introduce you to them all," she went on to say after a short pause. "But I suppose you have some letters of introduction with you?"

"Yes," Eric said, "I have several to men with whom I have to do business, and I have another to a Mr Watson, given me by a fr—a man I know in Glasgow called Lerman."

The sunset beams were eclipsed by the light that shone from Mrs Forsyth's eyes. Looking up at the tall man by her side she exclaimed, or rather gasped:

"Why, this is absolutely too——" and for the first time in her life she failed to find an appropriate adjective. "Why, they are the dearest people, and as for Blanche, well——" and again language failed her.

"Who is Blanche?" Eric asked.

"Blanche? Why, she's their daughter. Didn't Mr Ler—the gentleman who gave you the note tell you about her?"

"No," Eric replied, "he did not mention her."

"Jolly good job, too," she reflected, but took care to leave the thought unsaid. Mrs Forsyth always spoke like a lady, but had a habit of thinking like her father's daughter. When she spoke again it was to launch forth into a compre-

hensive account of dear Blanche's good qualities, and especially the sweetness and modesty of her disposition.

It was a heaven-sent opportunity, she said to herself. Blanche had done her one or two good turns, the net result of which had been that Annie Symes had become the wife of Captain Forsyth, whose regiment had at the time been stationed in Rangoon. One good turn deserves another, and she would do her best for her sweet friend, now that she had the chance of returning her kindness.

After she had gone to change for dinner Eric remained where he was, watching the mystery of the night steal over the desert. This was the East, but not the East of his dreams, and he felt thankful a week later when Aden faded into the distance and the *Martaban* had started on the last stage of her journey direct for Rangoon.

Another week passed, and the afternoon sun, which had shone from a cloudless sky since early morning, was dropping towards the horizon when the steamer began to slow down and finally came to a dead stop.

There is no stranger sensation than the silence that falls over a steamer when her engines stop running. It always conveys to the mind the feeling of some impending catastrophe, and in this case the passengers did what they invariably do under the circumstances, and hurried to the side of the ship to see what was the matter.

It was no disaster that was imminent, however. The world, so far as that ship was concerned, consisted, as it had consisted for days past, of a perfect circle of blue waters, but it was broken now by the sails of a boat which was approaching them.

"The river-pilot," said the Chief Officer, who

was passing on deck. "That's the mouth of the Irrawaddy," he added, pointing out over the boat.

In the direction in which he pointed there was a faint haze far away on the horizon, and to one member of that watching company it sent a thrill which vibrated throughout his whole being. This was the materialisation of his brightest dreams; this was the East which had beckoned him from afar; and that delicate film hanging over the edge of the still waters was to him as the touch of its outstretched hand.

CHAPTER XVII

A DAY OF MISFORTUNES

IN the gloom of a December morning a girl stood at the window of a house in Glasgow. The table was laid for breakfast and a cheerful fire was blazing in the grate, but she had turned her back on these comforts and was staring at the dismal prospect outside, which consisted chiefly of a raw Scotch mist and the wet that was dripping from the trees. For two mornings past she had been the first to come down, and on each occasion had gone to the window to look out. Her demeanour, even on this depressing day, was not one of melancholy, but of eager anticipation, with a touch of anxiety perhaps, as though she might be disappointed in that for which she was waiting.

Suddenly a little thrill of excitement passed over her as she caught sight of the postman farther down the road. She watched him impatiently as he went from one house to another and reflected, as some more of us may have done under similar circumstances, that he was a great deal more deliberate in his movements than was necessary. A shade of annoyance came over her face when she saw him stop to speak to the cook at the next door, but she forgave him when he did not pass her own home, but turned in at the gate with several letters for delivery. Meeting him at the door, she eagerly scanned the envelopes and felt as though she would like to have called him back to thank him when she saw the postmark "Port

Said " on one of them. Hurrying up to her own room, she kissed this particular one and then proceeded to open it. These foreign-paper things do stick, and perhaps her fingers were shaking somewhat, but at last she extracted the letter from its covering and began to devour its contents.

Her face was a study in expression as she went on reading, and by the time she had reached the end it denoted something very like disappointment. Then she read it all through again, and hurried down to breakfast, as the gong had sounded some time before.

" Were there any letters for me? " her father said as she kissed him good morning.

" Yes, there were three," she replied with some confusion, for she could not remember what she had done with them. " I must have left them outside," she added. Eventually she found them on the bedroom floor. They must have slipped down somehow.

" I heard from Eric," she said as she resumed her place at the table.

" And how is he? " her mother asked.

" He is quite well and seems to be enjoying himself very much," Marian answered.

That short sentence represented her feelings as she had read Eric's letter. There had been four sheets of really interesting matter, with vivid descriptions of all he had seen and experienced. What he said was satisfactory enough; it was what he did not say and what she was hungering to read that troubled her. The fact was that Eric Rankin had made the mistake that men make over and over again in this world, of taking it for granted that the girl he loved and missed knew that he loved and missed her, and consequently he had neglected to mention the fact. He did not know

that a girl not only likes to be loved but likes to be told so, and on every possible occasion too. "Taking for granted" has wrecked the happiness of many a devoted couple ere now.

She ate her breakfast in silence except to reply to any remarks her mother made, and when the meal was finished retired to her room once more and took out the letter for another perusal.

Try as she would to read between the lines she could not find the sentiments she longed to see, and when she thought of all he had said to her the night before he sailed, the letter seemed all the more bare in comparison.

Perhaps the murky darkness of the morning had something to do with the state of her feelings. It may be also that she had made a mistake in reading the letter before breakfast; it is not, as we all know, the most inspiring period of the day. Or it might be, and this was most probable of all, that she had not realised that few men understand during the period of engagement a woman's way of looking at such matters. There are a good many who never understand it even after they are married, but not quite so many as before that event. Anyhow, whatever was the cause, she put the letter away with a sigh and went about her household duties, though not with the enjoyment she usually took in them.

When anyone makes a bad start for the day, undoubtedly the best thing they can do is to go back to bed and stay there until next morning. It was a pity that Marian Barclay did not make use of this advice, for that day was one of the most consistently unlucky ones she had ever experienced. In the afternoon she had some shopping to do, and the assistants had never been so unmitigatedly stupid. She gave it up in disgust

at last, and on her way home thought she would drop in to see Elsie and Janet. It might be that they had heard from Eric, and who knows but that he might have told them how much he missed her and was longing to see her again. It would be a drop of comfort to her if he had.

They had heard from him by the same post as herself, and were full of his doings, the places he had passed, and the people he had met. Janet would have dearly loved to have given the Major a piece of her mind; and, as for Oom-bo-da, she only wished she had met him before she had known Jack Miller, and she would tell him so. Presumably it was Miller she would tell, not Oom-bo-da, though the way she put it left the question quite open. It was all very funny and exciting, but it grated on Marian's overwrought feelings, and she was glad to move on homewards after an hour or so. Her father had just come in, and Marian's hopes of a quiet evening and a confidential talk with her mother were dashed to the ground as she heard him tell Mrs Barclay that he had invited Mr Monroe, who was a grass-widower for a few days, to dine with them, and had asked Lerman to join them.

Mr Monroe was about the last person whom anyone who was feeling perturbed would have cared to meet. Yet Mr Monroe's great pride lay in the fact that he was a humorist and could "buck people up," as he termed it. As a matter of fact, he generally worked them into a state of irritation, even if they had been quite cheerful beforehand, as his idea of humour was to make personal jokes which were by no means acceptable to those concerned. If you dined at the same table and happened to be a doctor, he facetiously asked you to carve on account of your experience in the

dissecting-room, and then asked you if pills were going up because they were meant to go down. It was a joke of course. If you were a lawyer he asked you whether the weather was going to clear or keep up, according as it happened to be wet or fine, and then with a countenance full of alarm beseeched you not to give him an answer in case he should receive a bill for six-and-eightpence. If you were engaged he inquired how many times a week you were allowed to kiss your fiancée; while if you were married he asked you if your wife combed your hair for you when you came home from the Club.

This evening Marian was an excellent target for his sallies. They were well matched, he informed her and the company in general, as he was a grass-widower and she was a grass-fiancée, and they could therefore sympathise with one another. His little pleasantries might have been harmless enough had it not been that they afforded the other guest the opportunity of wielding weapons of a more subtle but infinitely more dangerous character. As the well-meaning but utterly tactless gentleman began to talk of the bewitching Burmese maidens, Lerman encouraged him to the top of his bent, and supplemented his innocent jokes by stories of his own, which were artless enough in themselves, but conveyed an impression which was anything but savoury. The man who tells a vile tale in a vile manner is a saint compared with the one who presents it in an innocent guise. Lerman began with tales of flirtation on board ship, and said it was wonderful how even steady-going people lost their heads when they were at sea. He had known of young ladies going out to be married and getting engaged to someone else on the voyage. In one case he knew of a young lady who went so far as to leave the ship at one

of the intermediate ports and marry another man then and there. Then he spoke of the flirtations carried on between married ladies and bachelors in the East, recounting things he had seen, in a half-joking manner, but without leaving any doubt on the subject. After that he discussed the charm of Burmese women, and what excellent wives some of them made to Englishmen out there, and their devotion to their husbands and children.

"But it must be very awkward for these men when they come back to this country, for they cannot bring their wives with them," Mrs Barclay remarked.

"Oh, well, you see, they are not really married as we regard it in this country," Lerman replied. "Their marriage laws are very different to ours." He looked, or pretended to look, confused, and apologised for having mentioned the subject.

He had directed his observations especially to Mr Monro, but had not failed to take note of Marian's face meanwhile. She had been looking in an indifferent manner at her plate most of the time, but the slight flush on her cheeks told Lerman that she had heard and understood what he had been saying. The thought afforded him great satisfaction, as it was for her benefit and hers alone that he had ever introduced the topic. Yet so skilfully had he worked up to it and so carefully had he trodden the thin ice of this dangerous theme, that it was impossible for anyone to show their displeasure or dispute his statements; for he had made these in such a way as to give his hearers the impression that he regretted the facts of which he made mention.

Two hours later Marian retired to her room with a feeling of thankfulness that at last she could be alone. She was tired out with the emotions of

the day and was glad to lay her head on the pillow. Yet no sooner had she done so than she found herself wide awake, and, try as she would, sleep would not come to her. Her disappointment at Eric's letter and the recollection of Lerman's yarns revolved in her mind with wearying pertinacity. To say that she associated those yarns with her lover would be to do her a grave injustice. Yet who can blame her if, as she lay there with her nerves strung up and her brain in a whirl with sheer tiredness, the two trains of thought that ran side by side through her mind sometimes got mixed up together.

It does not follow that a poison, to fulfil its purpose, is necessarily instantaneous in its effects; some of the most deadly are the slowest but the most certain in their action.

CHAPTER XVIII

THE DAWN OF THE YEAR

THE year was fast passing away. Three days more and it would be numbered with the past. It was the night of the Rankins' party, and Marian Barclay stood in front of her mirror putting the finishing touches to her hair.

Their parties were always pleasant affairs, but to-night Marian was looking forward to this one with mingled feelings, for there would be a big gap that no one else could fill, and she had never missed Eric so much as she was doing on this particular evening. Still, in spite of that, she determined, if only for other people's sakes, to enter into the fun and enjoy herself as much as possible.

Half an hour later she drove up to the door of the Rankins' house. It was an animated scene which met her as she entered the large hall, for she was almost the last arrival, and a goodly crowd of men and girls were passing in and out of the different rooms. She was greeted by Mr Rankin, who kissed her as was his wont; for he dearly loved this sweet girl, who was to him as another daughter.

During the past month he had been exceptionally tender and affectionate with her, for he knew that she was troubled by her father's opposition to her engagement, though why he should oppose it baffled his understanding.

"Try to enjoy yourself, my dear," he said to

her, "even if Eric is not here. We all miss him, but you more than any of us."

It would be ungrateful of her not to do her utmost to contribute to the evening's amusements, she told herself. As she saw Elsie bustling about intent on making everybody happy, but with a sorrow in her heart that time might mitigate but could never banish, her conscience smote her, and she determined still more to be as bright as she possibly could.

Miller, who was acting as Master of the Ceremonies in Eric's absence, announced that supper was ready, and was promptly hustled for his pains by the two hostesses, who said it was nothing of the sort. "Then what are we going to do? ask riddles or what?" he said.

"Do what you like," Elsie told him, "only do try and be a good boy. What would you like to do?" she asked the company. "You can have the dining-room and hall cleared for a dance, or have a silly evening, if you prefer it."

It was before the days when people were stuck down at card-tables and made to play bridge whether they cared for it or not.

Miller promptly voted for the latter of her suggestions. It would be such a change for him to be silly for once, he said, and then tried to look mystified when everybody laughed.

So they played the good old games which we have lost sight of in these superior days, considerably to our own detriment. The M.C. at once proposed "Postman's Knock," and put it to the vote, but it was not carried, as all the men voted for it and all the girls against it, and the latter were in a majority of one; upon which the M.C. handed in his resignation with tears in his eyes. He recovered when they started "Musical Chairs,"

and was very proud when he survived to the final and competed for the honours with Marian. When the music stopped they both sat down at the same time, but the victory rested with the doctor, for he sat on the chair and Marian plumped down on his knee. She did not sit there long, not half long enough he told her, and when she jumped up in her pretty confusion and joined in the general laugh she looked better and happier than she had done for weeks past.

Supper over, the M.C., whose resignation had not been accepted, suggested a new game. Every man was to choose a girl and take her off to a quiet corner out of sight of everybody else. Where all the quiet corners were to be found, or what they were to do when they got there, he did not specify. He started the game by annexing Marian and conducting her to one of the only two such nooks which the hall afforded.

It was in fact nothing but this kindly intention which had prompted him to suggest this entirely new pastime. He seldom had the chance of a quiet talk with her, and had noticed that of late the girl had been looking worried, and as Eric's best friend, in addition to his own standing in the family, he felt it his duty to find out if there was anything wrong.

Her heart warmed towards this good-hearted fellow as he talked of Eric and all his doings. Once or twice she almost made up her mind to unburden herself of her troubles, but the same pride which had prevented her from mentioning the subject to her mother made her shrink from saying anything about it now.

It would seem almost like disloyalty, she said to herself. It was a pity she had not yielded to the impulse. Miller was a bachelor, but he was also a

doctor, and a doctor learns a good deal from other people's experiences that most men only find out from their own, and he might have pointed things out to her in a very different light from that in which she had been viewing them.

Yet the talk did her a lot of good, and when she went home that night it was with a feeling that her trust in her lover had been restored, and it was only when this dawned upon her that she realised that it had ever been shaken.

Had Miller's genial influence been allowed to remain undisturbed, the poison which had been so subtly instilled into her mind might have lost its power, but the same hand which had administered the first dose was to dispense a second one, more potent in itself, and still more so by rousing the first one to activity.

Three days later, and the old year had died and the new one reigned in its stead; and as Marian Barclay woke in the morning, her first thought was, what would the new year bring with it? That it would be a decisive one, so far as she herself was concerned, she could not doubt; and as she looked ahead she did so with the detached consciousness of a person reading a book and trying to guess how it was going to end. Her part in the drama seemed to have been mapped out for her, taken out of her own hands, and the keynote of her meditations was Destiny. It only requires a certain combination of circumstances, bodily health included, to make us all fatalists.

To-morrow or the next day Eric's second letter was due to arrive, and Marian found herself looking forward to it with a curious apprehension. She had an innate feeling that upon the spirit in which it was written largely depended her future

and his. If in lover-like fashion he poured out his heart to her and showed her that she was all in all to him, then she could look forward with quiet, happy confidence to the months and years that stretched in front of her. If he again failed to do this, then—the page of the future was blank, and only the hand of Fate could write what was to be. And it was in this frame of mind that Marian Barclay rose on the first morning of the new year.

The day was a Bank Holiday, and Maurice Lerman was to spend it with them. Yet that thought did not cause her any disquietude. She liked him no better than before, but of late she had lost her dread of being alone in his company, as he had intended she should.

It was to this end that since Eric's departure he had avoided showing her, by word or look, that she was any other than the daughter of his host so far as he was concerned. He never held her hand one fraction of a second longer than mere politeness demanded, and never obtruded himself on her company. In fact he would often leave her without any apparent occasion for doing so, and go into another room. Especially would he do this if she seemed tired or worried, and gradually she grew grateful to him for his consideration.

If Lerman ever spoke to her of Eric it was to exhibit a sincere interest in his doings, and he never once, even by the most indirect hint, said anything to his detriment. One step at a time was his motto, and during the past weeks he had devoted himself to disarming Marian's suspicions in regard to himself and of dispelling the repugnance which he was aware she felt to his presence.

And as she held out her hand with a friendly smile when he arrived for lunch on this New Year's

Day he knew that his efforts had not been in vain.

During the course of the afternoon it chanced that they were alone together in the breakfast-room, and Lerman asked her if she had heard from Eric again, and then went on to speak of him, saying what a fortunate man he was to be revelling in warm, cloudless weather, so very different from what they were having at home, and speculating as to the various scenes of interest and beauty he was visiting.

Through all his talk, on that afternoon as for weeks past, there ran a subtle note of sympathy, unspoken, yet making itself felt by some artful inflection of the voice, as if he assumed she was in need of commiseration. If he had put it into plain language she would have flashed out at him in her resentment, as he knew quite well. Introduced in this cunning manner, she had no option but to accept it silently, and of late she had had to do this so frequently that at last it became natural to her to do so. On this particular occasion his sympathy became more marked, and at last he took a more decisive step. He knew that there was an element of risk in doing so, but he knew also that the man who takes no risks rarely succeeds in the end.

"Do you know," he said, "that I can't help feeling worried about your position in this matter? I do hope that Mr Rankin will be true to you."

The gentle blue eyes were ablaze with anger now. "And why should he not be true to me?" she exclaimed as she turned round and faced him.

"I beg your pardon for having hinted at such a thing," he said in a tone of contrition, "and it is only a silly idea that has been in my head of

late owing to a remark I heard him make at the Club the last night but one before he sailed. It was my anxiety on your account that made me think more of it than I was justified in doing. There was probably nothing in it, and I beg of you to think no more of it."

But she insisted on his being more explicit, as he had meant her to do, and he replied that he had no right to have taken any notice of what he had heard, as it was not meant for his ears, but that he could not help hearing what was said as he happened to be passing at the time.

Marian said, however, that having told her as much as he had done, it was only justice to Eric that he should say the rest. So he informed her, with an air of reluctance, that he had heard Eric discussing his engagement in conversation with MacLeod, and that he had finished up by saying that he was sick of it and hoped this trip would bring it to an end.

"I don't believe a word of it," Marian told him emphatically.

"Then ask MacLeod," he said to her. He knew quite well that he was safe in saying this, as her maidenly pride would forbid her doing anything of the sort. Then, in an aggrieved tone, he added, "Of course, I don't expect you to thank me for my interference in the matter, although it has been prompted entirely by my consideration for you. I cannot bear to think of your being befooled in this way, but I have long since found out that one gets precious little thanks in this world for trying to do one's best for anyone." And Maurice Lerman was very, very hurt.

The girl said no more, but left him and went up to her own room.

She felt as though she would burst out crying at any minute, and with a feeling of utter misery she flung herself down on her bed. It was not merely what this man had just told her that wrung her heart, but the further fact that it exactly corroborated what her father had told her a few days before as emanating from a friend of his own. The tears did not come to her relief, however, for she was too stunned to cry.

She did not know that the friend at the Club and the man who had just told her the story were one and the same person. When Lerman had told Mr Barclay of what he had heard he asked him not to mention it to Miss Marian, and consequently that worthy man, who was loth to lose such a golden opportunity of putting a spoke in Eric's wheel, recounted it to his daughter as coming from this mythical friend. He was wise enough to know that if he mentioned Lerman's name in connection with the story Marian would at once challenge the latter with it.

It could not, could not be true, she said over and over again to herself, in the hope that the very repetition of the phrase would convince her of its falsity. Yet it was true. That was the clever part about Lerman's account. Eric had uttered those very words in talking to MacLeod about his engagement to Marian. But Lerman had taken good care to suppress the context, and to omit one item, of which he was perfectly aware, as he had been sitting unobserved close to the two men during the whole of their conversation, namely that what Eric was sick of, and what he hoped the trip would put a stop to, was not his engagement to Marian, but the pig-headed opposition and the irritating obstacles which her father was putting in their way.

For a whole hour a gentle, true-hearted girl lay on her bed torn in twain between the doubts which had taken root in her mind and her desire to be loyal to the man she had promised to marry.

CHAPTER XIX

A TURNING POINT

Two days later Eric's letter arrived. Her hand did not shake this time as she opened it; in fact she was surprised at her own coolness. She made up her mind, in order to save herself disappointment, that it would be no more ardent than the first, and consequently on reading it she found, as we all find, just what she expected.

As a matter of fact it was really an affectionate epistle, though it did not appear so to the girl who read it. Perhaps it was that the poison which had been instilled into her mind was spreading its baneful influence and distorting her mental vision.

For days afterwards she went about in an apathetic state, most abnormal for one of her temperament. It is a dangerous condition for a girl of naturally keen sensibilities. There is no such thing as a vacuum in the human heart. If it is not filled by one set of emotions it will assuredly be occupied by contrary ones, and an attitude of "don't care" is apt to leave it at the mercy of circumstances.

One afternoon Marian had been shopping and was walking homewards, when she was suddenly seized with an unaccountable feeling of resentment towards her absent fiancé. It seemed to come without any apparent cause, until she remembered that it was just at this very spot that he had warned her against Lerman. She had made allowances for it afterwards, as we have already seen, but now

the recollection of it recurred to her tinged with bitterness. As she walked on she endeavoured to put it out of her mind, but one thought led to another, and the words he was reputed to have said at the Club came back to her mind with added force.

Just then she passed a picture-shop, and looking in at the window saw an oil-painting which she recognised as a glen in Arran. And the sight of it recalled the words of love and tenderness he had spoken to her there, and a fit of self-reproach came over her. She recovered herself and did the wisest thing she had done for some time. She determined to call and see Elsie and tell her plainly of all that had been troubling her so sorely of late.

As she reached the door of the Rankins' house Miller met her on the doorstep, and his face was unusually grave. "I have been to see Elsie," he said, "and am sorry to say she is very ill again. She has another attack of rheumatic fever, much worse than the first. Will you go in? Although it won't be possible for you to see her, and Janet is busy looking after her."

Marian thanked him and walked away, and to do her justice she was more taken up with her sorrow for Elsie than with her own disappointment at not being able to speak to her, as she had wished.

Elsie too would have been equally disappointed had she known of it, for she had seen for some time past that Marian was troubled, and she had made several ineffective attempts to broach the subject to her, but had had to give it up discomfited when she found herself confronted by an impenetrable wall of reserve.

Twice a day after that Marian called to inquire for the patient, and would sit with Mr Rankin, or

with Janet if she happened to be free, which was not often, for Elsie liked to have her with her in spite of the presence of two trained nurses. Mr Rankin looked sadly old during these days of anxiety, and an air of profound gloom pervaded the whole house. It was only now that they had begun to find out what the gentle, unassuming girl lying in the darkened room, racked with pain, had been to them. She had taken the mother's place so quietly and unobtrusively that they had never realised before how wonderfully she had filled it.

Then one day Elsie expressed a wish to see Marian, and, the doctor giving his permission, she was asked to go up to the sick-room, when she called as usual that afternoon. Marian had met the day-nurse going out for her constitutional, and when she entered the bedroom she failed just at first to recognise the trim white-aproned figure standing by the bedside. And of a truth Dr Miller was proud of his probationer, as he called her, and it was difficult to recognise the tomboy of the family in this quiet, sedate woman whose every word and movement bespoke the born nurse. It was for Janet that the patient always asked when the pain was worse. No one else could move the poor tortured limbs with their swathings of cotton-wool so gently as this great strapping girl could do.

Miller had just called to pay his second visit of the day, and as he stood on one side of the bed and Janet on the other, Marian from her seat by the fire thought what a well-matched couple they were. There was no quizzing or teasing now; only the crisp questions and orders from the one and the clear straightforward answers and implicit obedience from the other, and on the faces of both that mingled look of sympathy and self-restraint that

is only seen to perfection in the true doctor or nurse.

"What a poor, helpless creature I am," thought Marian as she watched this capable pair at their work. And a feeling of envy stole over her as she mused on their happy, light-hearted love-affairs, so different from her own. Of course they had no opposition to encounter and that always has to be taken into account, but may it not have been also, though this did not occur to Marian, that they did not make the mistake of expecting too much from one another.

At last the happy day arrived when Elsie was pronounced to be on the road to recovery, and after that Marian had tea with her each day, and that quiet, restful hour was a daily peep of Heaven to the girl whose mind was distracted by doubts which she could not get rid of. Things might have been very different had she been able to speak to Elsie as she had intended to do, but she had not the heart to worry the invalid with her own troubles, just when she was recovering from such a severe illness, and by the time Elsie was well again something else had occurred which drove Marian back within herself and effectually put a stop to any chance of any confidences on her part.

Since her fateful conversation with Lerman on New Year's Day she had seen little of him. He did not come so often to the house, and when he did so took care to avoid being left alone with her.

He had a set purpose in acting thus, and on the few occasions when he took a meal with them he adopted the rôle of the injured party. He did it so well that in time she began to wonder if she had not treated him badly, and this feeling was accentuated by the line which her father took.

"Why can't you be more civil to Maurice?" he

said to her one day. "You speak to him in such an off-hand manner that he won't come to the house more than he can help."

Marian did not answer, for she knew the utter futility of arguing with him. Yet she left the room with her mind sorely divided against itself. If she made overtures of friendship towards Lerman, it would amount to a tacit acceptance of his version of statements in regard to herself, and that spelt disloyalty to her fiancé, who had had no chance of refuting them. If she wrote to Eric and asked him whether or no he had said what he was credited with, he would be caused a great amount of unnecessary worry and annoyance, provided the story were untrue. If on the other hand it was true, she would find it out for herself, quite soon enough, she reflected. She seemed at present ever to be standing at the parting of the ways.

Meanwhile one week after another passed without any further word from her lover. The fact was due entirely to the exigencies of his position, as every port he called at was farther away, and therefore necessitated a longer gap between his letters. Marian knew that at least twenty-three days must elapse between the last communication and the next one, but the best of us, when in a state of nervous irritability which has reacted on our general health, are apt to lose our sweet reasonableness at times.

As the days went by the perplexed girl, subjected to constant irritation from her father, and without anyone to whom she felt she could turn in her trouble—for her mother had enough of her own to bear and she would not burden her with more—and practically at the mercy of the unscrupulous man whose coming among them had been little

short of a curse, began to feel as though her lover was slowly but surely going farther and farther away from her, in more ways than one. The thought was with her one night as she fell asleep, and this probably accounted for the dream with which she awoke in the morning. She dreamt that Eric and she stood by a seashore, and a great wave came and swept him off his feet. In her terror she saw him drifting away from her, and when she called to him he turned a pair of dull, unrecognising eyes upon her, and the next moment disappeared from her sight.

"It was only a dream," she told herself as she lay palpitating with the horror of it, but it affected her more than she cared to think, and it helped to accentuate the mischief of the letter which arrived from him a few days later, and of another which came about the same time.

CHAPTER XX

FAIRYLAND

SELDOM is it that the fairyland dreams of our childhood are realised in later life, but in this case, thought Eric Rankin, they had surely done so, as the steamer sailed upstream on her way to Rangoon. A delay of some hours had occurred, caused by the necessity of waiting for the turn of the tide, and night had fallen by the time the ship entered the mouth of the river.

The darkness was short-lived, however, for almost as soon as the sun had set there was a glow in the Eastern sky, and the moon rose in all her splendour, and soon the whole land lay bathed in the silvery sheen.

It was Eric's first view of the Tropics, and it seemed as if the East, which had allured him from his home and friends, had put on her most bewitching aspects to receive him.

The river itself coiled like a ribbon of molten silver, from which the bows of the ship threw off showers of golden phosphorescence. The leaves of palm and fern tree, lining the banks, stood out in exquisite tracery, and from the dense undergrowth came the stir of innumerable creeping things, whilst every now and then the heavy odours of tropical plants were wafted across the deck.

Two men stood together on the deck: the one of Western birth, luxuriating in his first glimpse of this strange and wonderful land; the other an Oriental, no less appreciative, for to him this was

home and the end of his exile. Neither of them spoke, for there are thoughts which render words futile. The lights of the town drew gradually nearer, and the pinnacle of that great pagoda, which is one of the sights of the world, towered up clear and distinct against the rich deep blue of the moonlit sky.

One more bend of the river and they came to anchor in the midst of a vast quantity of shipping. Oom-bo-da and Eric had decided to remain on the boat all night and to leave her next morning—the one to proceed to his home in Bassein, fifty miles away, the other to the hotel which was to form his headquarters for the time being.

After an early breakfast Oom-bo-da kindly accompanied Eric to the hotel, to help him in choosing a suitable boy who should act as his body-servant during his stay in the country. As they were leaving the ship Rankin heard his name spoken, and looking round saw a middle-aged gentleman in white ducks, and with the inevitable topee, or sun-helmet, on his head, inquiring for him. Eric made himself known to him, and the man turned out to be Mr Watson, to whom he had brought a letter of introduction.

“I heard you were coming,” Mr Watson said, “so hastened to meet you.”

Presenting his card, he told Eric that he would expect him to take tiffin at his house at two o'clock that day.

Eric was highly gratified by this hospitable offer, and readily accepted the invitation, after which he made his way to the hotel, accompanied by his Burmese friend.

A boy was secured at one of the agencies, and guaranteed to be both honest and sober. He hailed from Madras, the men of which make the poorest

of fighters but the best of servants. He accompanied his new master through all his wanderings, proving himself a faithful retainer, and only twice asked for a couple of days' leave to bury his mother, returning on each occasion with a penitent manner and a suggestively shaky look about him.

When Eric reached Mr Watson's house a few minutes before two he found himself confronted by a broad flight of steps leading to a verandah, which ran the whole length of the building. There being no sign of any rooms on the ground floor; he ascended the steps and looked for the bell. This he failed to find, simply because there was none. There was no front-door either, or any other door for the matter of that, only a large entrance-hall which communicated by means of curtained apertures with the living apartments. He did not know that he ought to have shouted "Boy," and gone on calling this out at intervals until the arrival of that menial.

Consequently he stood there for some minutes feeling decidedly foolish, and totally unaware that all that time he was undergoing a rigid scrutiny from a pair of eyes not ten feet away.

The eyes in question belonged to Blanche Watson, the only daughter of his host. She was sitting behind one of the bamboo curtains, through a chink of which she was able to obtain a good look at the visitor, without any chance of being observed in turn. We must presume of course that it was mere coincidence that she should be there just when he was expected, but considering the fact that the same thing had happened several times before, when strangers, in the shape of possible suitors, were due to call, we are justified in having our suspicions that her presence on this occasion was not wholly accidental,

At last she rose, and, humming lightly to herself, walked across the hall in a charmingly girlish manner. She had nearly reached the opposite side when, chancing to look out towards the verandah, she saw a young man standing there. With a sweetly bashful look she came forward and inquired if he had come to see her father.

Eric explained who he was and that he had come at Mr Watson's invitation to lunch.

"Oh! I am so sorry that I did not know who you were," the young lady replied. "Papa told us this morning that he met you on the *Martaban*. Have you just come out from home?"

It was a singular lapse of memory on her part, seeing that for the past month, since she had heard of his intended visit, she had been looking forward with the greatest interest to meeting him.

Blanche Watson was, we may explain, twenty-six years of age, and up to the present had not succeeded in securing a husband. Of course at home twenty-six is considered young for a girl in these days, and many at that age have not begun to trouble themselves with the question of marriage. It is a different matter in a climate where women lose their looks early, and where men are apt to prefer the freshness of girls who have just come out from home to the jaded pallor of those who have spent some years in a tropical climate. Several times had Blanche nearly become engaged, but in spite of the fact that she had good features and a fine figure and was an excellent conversationalist, she still remained single. Perhaps it was due to the fact that she made her intentions too obvious, possibly also because her charming diffidence gave way in time to a boldness which had the effect of causing the young men's attentions to dwindle and finally cease. She was a clever girl

though, and it had dawned upon her that she had been making a mistake in her methods. When therefore she heard from Mr Lerman that the only son of one of Glasgow's richest merchants was coming out to Rangoon, she determined to be more circumspect.

As Eric Rankin sat at lunch with them, no one could have been more good-natured than Miss Watson, though in that dutiful manner-befitting the daughter of the house in dealing with a guest at her father's table.

After lunch Mr Watson had to return to the office, but announced his intention of coming home at half-past four to take Mr Rankin for a drive. Mrs Watson and Blanche, along with Eric, rested in the welcome shade of the verandah all the afternoon, and it was while taking their tea a couple of hours later that a note arrived from Mr Watson to say that he was detained, but that Blanche would take Mr Rankin out.

"In luck for once," was that young lady's unspoken thought.

The dogcart was brought round and Eric took his seat beside the girl who drove, while the *sais*, according to custom, hung on behind. They drove out through Dalhousie Park and round by the lakes and Eric was simply delighted with the various scenes which passed before them, as everyone must be who for the first time drives along the roads and through the suburbs of the town which has earned for itself the title of "Queen of the East."

They passed along highways, which it were an insult to designate as streets or roads, for the palms and bamboos which lined them had converted them into avenues, past English houses and native huts, alike smothered in flowering creepers, whilst

the many-coloured costumes of the natives as they moved along with their graceful, swaying walk, and the creaking bullock-wagons and the *ghayris*, with their diminutive Burmese ponies, added to the interest and beauty of the scene. And when they reached the lakes with their wealth of tropical vegetation, vivid with the glow of the sunset, Eric could hardly contain himself.

All through the drive his enthusiasm was infectious, and his companion took care to enter thoroughly into his feelings. She was well content to have this man sitting by her side, but had she known it his mind was fully occupied with two considerations: the charm of the scenes he was witnessing and the wish that Marian were there to enjoy them with him. Blanche Watson's share consisted of the polite attentions which a well-bred man naturally shows to those who have given him of their hospitality.

On arriving at the house again Mrs Watson insisted on his staying to dinner, and he availed himself of the invitation, after driving back to the hotel to change his light flannel suit for the conventional evening-dress.

After dinner a number of friends joined their party, an informal invitation having been sent out to that effect. The sight of a fresh face from home is a welcome one to those forced to spend their lives so far from their native soil, and any who are privileged, as they regard it, to entertain the new-comer are not slow to call their friends and neighbours to rejoice with them over the event.

The company which sat in the Watsons' drawing-room consisted of three married couples and several bachelors, and a couple of hours passed quickly with the aid of music and games. Miss Watson had a good contralto voice and possessed

the knack of looking her best when singing, which is a rarer accomplishment than good singing itself, and it is no exaggeration to say that as she sat at the piano in a white evening-dress which suited her to perfection she looked superb. When she had finished her first song, Eric, out of sheer politeness, as the guest of the evening, asked her to sing again. She assented and chose another piece from the cabinet, and looking across at him asked him if he knew it. As she did not mention the name of the song he was obliged to walk to the piano and look at the title, and consequently felt obliged to ask if he should turn over the pages for her. At the sight of the good-looking eligible bending over the piano the same thought struck more than one member of the company. In the case of two bachelors who happened to be standing in the background the idea found expression in a significant and simultaneous wink.

At ten o'clock the guests dispersed, for late hours are not advisable in a country where everybody gets up at six in the morning with the regularity of the sun, which rises punctually at that hour all the year round, regardless of the season.

When Eric reached his hotel he felt little inclination for sleep. His first day in the Tropics had been an eventful one, and his imagination was fired by the strange scenes he had witnessed, and his mind glowed with the vivid colouring that had met his eye at every turn. He lounged lazily and comfortably in his cane-chair with a photograph standing on the table by his side. It was a cabinet-sized copy of the face which had attracted his attention and taken possession of his heart in the studio at old Dagleish's twelve months before.

As he ruminated over all the doings of the day and lived over again that glorious drive in the

afternoon, his one thought was that, enjoyable as it had been, it would have been Heaven itself if only in place of Miss Watson Marian had been there to enjoy it with him.

At the same moment a young lady who was also pondering over the recollections of that drive was thinking that while money was the first consideration in a husband it was a matter for congratulation that in this case good looks and a fine presence happened to go with it.

CHAPTER XXI

PURSUED

"CHOTA-HAZRA, sahib," was the cry that awaked Eric the next morning, and opening his eyes he saw his boy standing by his bedside with the cup of coffee and roll which constitutes that meal. Whilst he was taking it the boy prepared his cold tub in the curious bathroom leading out from his sleeping apartment, and open to the sky, as they always are in that part of the world.

By the time he had finished dressing it was seven o'clock, and he had four hours in which to occupy himself before the eleven o'clock breakfast. He determined to drive round and see the town for himself, and by himself. He would have been ungrateful had he not appreciated the kindly hospitality shown him on the previous day, but he was keenly anxious to see the great sight of Rangoon—one might truly say one of the greatest sights in the world—the colossal Shwe-Dagon Pagoda.

Half an hour later, stepping out of his *ghayri* at the entrance which is guarded by two great dragon-like figures, he made his way up the two hundred steps of the covered passage, which led to the vast tableland, the highest eminence for a hundred miles around. As he emerged from the darkness of the tunnel into the clear morning sunshine, he caught his breath at the prospect which met him.

The enormous expanse of rice-fields, jungle, and

ocean first held him spellbound, then he gazed around at the temples of all shapes and sizes, two hundred all told, which were scattered about in all directions, along with the shops, where the devotee may obtain his meals and anything else he may need on the great feast-days, when the people will stay there for a whole day, or even for days at a time; after which he came across the celebrated bell, the sweetest-toned in the world, it is said, named by the Burmans the Mountain of Sound, every stroke of which confers undying merit on the striker. Not to be behind-hand he lifted the great hammer and wielded it twenty times, and felt better for the exercise, if not in any other way.

All this time, curiously enough, though his experience in this respect was not a solitary one, he had failed to see the object of his visit, and that not because it was hidden or inaccessible, but simply because, paradoxical as it may sound, it is so enormous that the eye is apt to overlook it at first. He had been walking for a mile, inspecting temple after temple, and had never noticed that they formed the fringe of the base of the great pagoda itself.

The fact dawned on him at last, and as he walked backwards a hundred yards or so in order to take in its proportions, it simply took his breath away, as it has done to many a traveller before.

Shaped like a hand-bell, with each side of its base a quarter of a mile in length, and covered with goldleaf from top to bottom, and surmounted by a graceful pinnacle studded with jewels of a price which cannot be estimated, and towering to a height of three hundred and seventy feet, it forms a spectacle of unsurpassed brilliancy. The

highest point for a hundred miles in any direction, this King of Pagodas dominates the land, like the religion of which it is the symbol.

Burma swarms with pagodas of every size. You may see them on every road, in every village, on every hill, and in the wildest parts of the jungle, and alongside of each you will see a temple, for the pagoda itself is but a sign, indicating to the Buddhist a place where he may exercise his religion, as a church steeple signifies to the Christian the presence of a building dedicated to the worship of his God.

Yet there is no other to be compared with this giant one, the Shwe-Dagon, which is the Mecca of every true Burmese Buddhist, and in consequence the tableland on which it stands is always, no matter what time of the day you may chance to visit it, a moving panorama of native life and character. And the native puts on his best clothes when he visits it, and in his case best clothes mean brightest colours, which transform the whole scene into one vast living kaleidoscope.

Many an approving glance was cast in the direction of the tall English sahib, for the Burmese girl is as much at liberty as a white man is to express, either by word or look, her admiration of a member of the opposite sex, and without any loss of modesty on her part.

There were many things Eric would have liked to have inquired about in connection with the various objects which met his eye in all directions, and he had spoken to several men in succession, but with little avail, for the Burman is a dull person compared with his womankind. He had avoided speaking to any of the women, concluding that they would be too shy to answer him, which shows how little he knew about them. As a

matter of fact, a Burmese girl will turn away from a man who speaks to her in any language she does not understand, but let him address her in her own tongue and she will enter into conversation with him at once.

He had worked so assiduously at the language with Oom-bo-da's assistance that he was able to speak intelligently, if not fluently.

When, therefore, Eric at last plucked up his courage and spoke to two girls who were walking past, he was charmed with the artless air of candour and good-comradeship with which they answered him. The Burmese maiden is a curious mixture of girlish fun and womanly self-possession. He had never met anyone quite like them before, he thought, as he looked down at the two pairs of lustrous dark eyes that gazed up so frankly into his face. Perhaps the eyes in question beamed all the more because they detected the envious glances that were directed towards them from other young women in the vicinity.

It was a charming picture, this fine young Englishman in his white linen suit, and the two Burmese girls in their silk *lungi* of rose-pink and light-blue respectively, and one of the trio was quite unaware of the fact that he was the cynosure of two other pairs of feminine eyes besides those of the native girls who passed to and fro.

One of the pair was regarding him with a look of decided amusement, but the other had a decided expression of displeasure, as he found out when he suddenly turned at the sound of a voice which said:

"Good morning, Mr Rankin. I hope you are enjoying the sight of our great pagoda?"

There was the slightest possible emphasis on the last word, and a quizzical look on Mrs

Forsyth's face as she held out her hand to him. As for Miss Watson, she had been so annoyed at the sight of him talking to these pretty maidens that, just at first, it was all she could do to hide her feelings as she greeted him. Captain Forsyth, being a man, did not care a rap one way or the other, and gave him a hearty, unaffected handshake.

They walked about together for some time, but the glamour had gone out of the morning, and Miss Watson's sweet nothings as she calmly appropriated him grated on him, and seemed strangely out of place with his surroundings.

It was nearly eleven o'clock, which meant breakfast-time, so they retraced their steps to the entrance, where their *ghayri* was waiting alongside his own. Mrs Forsyth begged him to come and breakfast with them, but he begged to be excused, as he had business matters to attend to. It was only at that moment that he had recollected the fact.

"Well, anyhow," said Mrs Forsyth, "you will be sure to call and see us when you come up to Mandalay. We are stationed there now, and shall always be pleased to take you about and show you the place."

He thanked her for her kind invitation, and said he would be only too pleased to call on them, and then drove back to his hotel, and there found two notes awaiting him from the secretaries of the Rangoon and the Ghymkana Clubs respectively, informing him that his name had been put down as an honorary member, and that he was entitled to all the privileges of the clubs in question as long as he remained in the country. He knew at once that it was one or other of the young fellows whom he had met on the previous evening that he had

to thank for this compliment, and once more he was surprised and gratified at the kind token of consideration which is so freely offered to every Britisher by his fellow-countrymen in the Indian Empire.

Needless to say he did ample justice to the breakfast, which had been ready for him any time the last hour, and after that went out and interviewed one of the shipping men, and then returned and slept until three o'clock. He would gladly have gone out then to see more of the natives who had so excited his interest, but duty demanded that he should pay an afternoon call on the Watsons, in return for their hospitality of the previous day. Return-calls of this sort are always expected to be paid within a day, or two days at the latest, as he fortunately had found out before leaving home.

One man from whom he inquired the reason of this custom, and who must surely have been a humorist in disguise, told him, "Well, you see, it's like this. What with cholera and one thing and another, people pop off so suddenly that they may be dead if you don't hurry up."

Eric by no means relished the prospect of meeting Miss Watson again so soon, and hoped that she would not be at home; but that young lady had taken very good care that she was there. Why he had taken an instinctive dislike to her he could not say, and reproached himself for having done so, but the fact remained. When he reached the house, where they were having tea on the verandah, he was relieved to find that there were other callers there already. One of the visitors was a middle-aged lady who hailed from Glasgow, and the pleasure which it afforded her to hear about all the people she had known was ample

compensation to Eric for what he had regarded as a wasted afternoon.

On sitting down he had placed his chair too near to the outside of the verandah, and feeling nearly baked he drew it in beneath the shade, and as he did so Mrs Watson turned round to him and said, "Remember, Mr Rankin, we are expecting you to spend Christmas Day with us on Thursday."

It seemed strangely incongruous to the perspiring young man, this mention of Christmas, and his thoughts flew to those he had left at home, and he wondered if Marian was getting her tea, and if she was thinking of him.

Like many another new-comer he had lost sight of the difference in time, for at that precise moment Marian was having her breakfast and gazing out at one of the bitterest snowstorms that had visited Glasgow for many a long year.

On taking his leave shortly afterwards, he drove to the Rangoon Club to go through the formality of leaving his card in the rack, and then proceeded to the Ghymkana to do the same. He had inquired for the men whom he had met the evening before, and was waiting while the native servant went to look for them, when he felt a grip on his arm and a hearty voice exclaimed, "Hullo! who on earth would have thought of seeing you here?"

Turning round he saw Dick Marshall, the very man who was, unconsciously to himself, the cause of his now having come out East.

It was a fortunate meeting, especially as Marshall was to leave for the forests next day, and, the other men not happening to be at the Club, they spent a very pleasant evening together, returning to Eric's hotel for dinner and a long chat

afterwards. As Marshall was leaving he stopped and said:

"Look here, the Watsons are entertaining you, aren't they? Of course, it's no business of mine, but—eh, just as a pal you know—but it's all right, I forgot for the moment you're engaged already." With which enigmatical statement he departed.

The days passed in a bewildering succession of events: visits to the bazaars, where the women sat at their silk and tobacco stalls smoking their long cheroots; visits to the pagoda by night, with the mysterious lights of the temples all around and the jewelled velvet of the tropic sky above; and also, what was the irksome part of his stay, the ever-increasing number of social calls which a constantly enlarging circle of acquaintances necessitated.

All the time, too, there was a fly in the ointment, if such a term may be applied to a member of the female sex, for it seemed like fate, that wherever he went Miss Watson was there too, always demure, always so surprised to see him, but—always there.

If he was enjoying a ride in the late afternoon he would be sure to hear his name called, and there was Miss Watson close at hand.

"Just imagine meeting you here," she would say in a voice which seemed to say that it was the very last place on earth where she would have expected to find him, although it was probably on one of the roads most commonly used for riding exercise by the English population. Then it would turn out that she was going in exactly the same direction as himself, and after that it happened that it was most fortunate that she had met him, as they had some people coming in that evening that he simply must meet. And when he

went there in the evening it was to hear that they were going to have a picnic next day at a place that he must not miss for anything.

And at the picnic it was mentioned casually in the course of conversation that there was a polo match at the Ghymkana the next afternoon, and as Mr Rankin had never seen the game he must go with them without fail, and so on *ad infinitum*.

It became a burden at last, and was not Eric's idea of seeing the country, so he decided to set off on his trip to Mandalay and all the wonders that awaited him there.

All this while Marian was much in his thoughts, and it was his one regret that she was not with him. He would bring her here for their honeymoon, he determined. He had told her so in his letter to her on the first mail-day, nearly a week after his arrival, and then had struck it out, because he thought it looked silly.

It takes a man a long time to learn that it is these so-called silly things that make a letter worth reading to the girl he is engaged to. It was a pity he cut it out; but it was a thousand pities he cut something else out, namely his candid opinion of Miss Watson.

"She has been very kind in trying to make my visit pleasant," he had written, "but I do not like her, though why I cannot exactly say. She is really too attentive, and if it were any other fellow except myself I should be disposed to say that she was running after me; anyhow, I shall be leaving here in a week or two, which, on this score at least, is a good thing."

Then, when he came to read it over, it seemed a nasty way of writing about a young lady who, along with her parents, had shown him so much hospitality; so he tore it up and began again, and

out of the goodness of his heart dwelt only on her kindness and good-nature. As we have said, it was a thousand pities he did so, for if he had sent the letter in its original form it would have saved a lot of trouble. It was not so much the letter itself that did the harm as the circumstance that it arrived at the same time as another missive which left Rangoon by the same mail, written in a feminine hand, and addressed to Maurice Lerman, Esq. And unfortunately, both for her own sake as well as for Eric's, Marian Barclay read them both.

Before leaving for North Burma Eric paid a few calls, and the last of these was on Mrs Watson. He thanked them for all their kindness, and Mr Watson insisted, and would brook no refusal, on his spending a week with them on his way back to England.

When he came out of the house Blanche accompanied him to the foot of the verandah steps, and, allowing her hand to rest in his for a few moments, said with a far-away look in her eyes, "We shall miss you very much."

As the *ghayri* passed out of the gate she added to herself:

"But I shall see you on your return, and you won't escape me then."

She might have saved herself the trouble, for from that day she never set eyes on Eric Rankin again.

CHAPTER XXII

RIVER REFLECTIONS

THERE is no form of motion more restful than sailing, and especially river sailing. It has all the advantages of fresh air and movement, whilst leaving the mind free to dwell on all that passes before the eyes, and to enjoy it to the full. It was this consideration, as much as his desire to view the scenery, which had led Eric to choose this longer route in preference to the railway. He had had a busy and exciting time of it in Rangoon, and this deliciously lazy rest filled him with a refreshing sense of peace and quiet. As he strolled about on deck or lounged in his chair listening to the gurgling of the water and watching the ever-changing scenes, he felt that he would have been content to have gone on like this for ever. His one regret was that it is necessary for human beings to go to bed sometimes.

The scene on the steamer itself was sufficient to amuse a traveller, for it was more like an Oriental town than a passenger-boat. Seeing that as many as a thousand natives can be accommodated at one time on these great, bulky vessels with their tiers of decks, after the fashion of the Mississippi steamers, and that a bazaar exists for their use, it follows that the tourist can scarcely feel dull, even if he has no eye for scenery.

There was no lack of variety either, for several times a day they would tie up at some town or village, and the inhabitants would rush on board

with supplies of fish, fruit, or rice, which they bartered for sale with much palavering. The arrival of the steamer was the one excitement in their lives, and they would crowd along the shore or peep out of the picturesque little huts built on piles, so as to keep their heads above water, both figuratively and literally, when the floods should come during the summer rains. Pretty pictures they made, too, especially when some Burmese mother, little more than a child herself perhaps, lifted her baby to see the *Mee-thin-baw*, as they call the steamer.

Then the great paddles would churn once more, and soon they were in the middle of the stream again, and fresh scenes would come into view. For this great water highway, with its twelve hundred miles of length, has hardly a dull spot in it. Ever bending, ever twisting, sometimes narrowing down to a few hundred yards, at other places so wide that the passenger seems to be sailing in the centre of a vast lake, each turn of it discloses to the eye some fresh view, more beautiful if possible than the last, or some new object of interest, either on its banks or on the surface of its swiftly flowing waters.

The effect of all this pageant on the artist mind of a man of Eric's temperament can well be imagined. He would like to have made sketches of these different scenes, for he had taken up his art again while in Rangoon, but was handicapped by a plethora of material. You can reproduce a single scene, but you cannot draw a panorama; and as each night he laid his head on the pillow his brain was teeming with dreams of running waters, mountains, jungles, villages, pagodas, and the human touch without which no picture is complete.

Half of his journey was now over, and the waters of the Irrawaddy sparkled in the morning sunshine as he came on deck to have a look around. It was nearly seven o'clock, and the mists which always hang over the river in the early part of the day were melting in fantastic wreaths and columns, disclosing to view on either side banks clothed to the water's edge with luxurious vegetation, and dotted with innumerable villages. To the east a vast expanse of jungle and forest stretched to the horizon, while on the other side there rose the great chain of the Yoma Mountains, their summits hidden by billowy masses of snow-white fog.

As he had stepped out on deck and stood drinking in the beauty of the morning scene, and filling his chest with great draughts of the fresh morning air, he had felt like a giant refreshed with wine. But the sight of that great range of mountains had struck upon his mind like a minor chord of sadness in the midst of his exultation. For at its upper end that chain breaks up into the hills around Manipur, where so many brave Englishmen had died for the sake of a country which has usually managed to overlook their deeds of valour; deeds that would have won the Victoria Cross had they been performed in orthodox warfare instead of the guerrilla fighting which is infinitely more difficult and dangerous.

A pained look came over Eric's face as he turned his eyes to the north, and thought of his sister Elsie, and of how the brightest hopes of her life lay buried there, and how her faithful heart clung to the memory of a lonely grave within the shadow of those everlasting hills. An unspoken prayer rose from his heart that in some way or other she

might be compensated for her goodness, and the sincere wish arose to his lips that he might be as true to his love as she had been to hers.

So far he certainly had nothing to reproach himself with in this direction, for Marian was seldom out of his thoughts. He had made her the centrepiece of every scene that had come before him, and during the past two days, while sailing up the river, he had written and told her of everything that had excited his interest. And as he had written he had talked to her as though she had been sitting by his side. So real had her imaginary company become to him that he had not bethought himself to tell her how much he missed her actual presence, and she would rather have read that one sentence than all the other items of information with which he furnished her.

He ought to have realised that fact, for if he had stopped to think he would have remembered that the parts of her letters which he best loved to read over and over again were those in which she had told him how much she missed him and was longing to see him again. Three of those letters were in his pocket at this moment, written after he had left home, and before she had had the chance to hear from him; real love-letters, in which she poured out her inmost heart and told him all that his absence meant to her.

And he was feeling just the same, and longed to see her as much as she wished to see him, but, since he did not mention the fact, she did not know it. And why, oh why, did he not mention it and bring joy into the eyes that scanned his notes in vain for that which they desired so much to see and could not find? He little thought that the time was coming, and coming quickly too, when, as her letters arrived, he would look through them

for these very words, and, like her, would look in vain.

When he had murmured that desire to be true to his love at home, he had never dreamt that such an unsatisfying moment would come to him, nor had he taken into account that the Spirit of the East, which was already beginning to cast a glamour over his sight, would seize that opportunity to blind his eyes to the memory of that love with the glowing fires of her own enchantment.

CHAPTER XXIII

THE ENCHANTMENT OF THE EAST

THE last stopping-place had been left behind and the towers and minarets of Mandalay were coming into view. In spite of the fact that the King was in exile and his Court dispersed, this royal and ancient capital had lost none of its charm. For when, only two years previously, Britain had made North Burma part of her great Empire, and had substituted a just and generous rule for a cruel and tyrannous despotism, she had followed her usual custom of leaving the conquered people to live their own lives in their own way. From the day Eric Rankin entered that city the spell of the East, which had been increasing its hold upon him with every stage of his travels, began to steal over his senses and to enter into his very life's blood.

He had made up his mind not to get entangled in a network of social functions this time, but he kept his promise of calling on the Forsyths, and never regretted having done so. The Captain was a well-informed man with a fund of information, and his wife, in spite of the fact that she had been inferior to him as regards birth, made him an excellent helpmate. Even her enemies had to acknowledge that she had exerted a wonderful influence over the dashing young officer, who had had fair to play ducks and drakes with his money and his reputation.

They certainly added considerably to the pleasure of his visit, for the Captain was always an interest-

ing companion, and his wife's exuberant way of talking was not at variance with Eric's present frame of mind. She had the admirable faculty too of keeping quiet when she saw that he was specially interested in anything which had taken his fancy. Furthermore, they showed great tact and consideration in not forcing the company of their friends upon him, and in thus leaving him free to enjoy to the utmost the manifold objects of interest with which that part of the country abounds. Altogether they were charming hosts, and gave him a hearty welcome whenever he called, morning, noon, or night.

He had many a pleasant drive with them, in which the Captain acted as guide and informant, and his wife added a touch of lightness by her naïve remarks. The first drive they took was the one which remained longest in Eric's memory, not because it was better than any other, but because it was the first.

"This is the Kutho-Daw," Captain Forsyth said, as they came in sight of a glittering expanse of sparkling pinnacles. "Nine hundred and ninety pagodas, with inscriptions on each, and if you began at one end and went right round you would have read the whole of the Buddhist scriptures."

"Yes, and I am going to read them all some day," his wife said, "but I have to learn Burmese first, and," with a plaintive sigh, "I'm nearly thirty now, so I'm afraid there won't be time."

The idea of Mrs Forsyth enduring such intellectual gymnastics amused the two men immensely.

A few minutes later they stopped in front of a blackened mass of ruins.

"You are unfortunate here, Rankin," the Captain said; "it is only a few months since this

was burnt down, and this heap is all that is left of the tiers and façades of the loveliest building in the world, the Incomparable Pagoda. The priests had prophesied that before the end of a certain time it would be burnt down, and as the period was nearly expired they set fire to it to make their prophecy good. At least there is strong presumptive evidence to that effect."

"Small prophets and quick returns," remarked Mrs Forsyth.

Then they drove to the Palace Gardens, and from the moment when Eric passed through the gates and saw them in all their matchless beauty, the mystic fascination of the East closed down on him and held him in its grip. The King and his retinue had gone, and their palaces were inhabited by military officers and Government officials, but the savour of a departed dynasty and the glamour of their presence hung over the whole scene.

You may take a town—for these palaces and their precincts covered many, many acres and could accommodate thousands of persons—and you may fill it with an alien race, but the ghosts of those who had inhabited it will never leave it. You may conquer a race and establish new laws and a new rule, but you cannot efface the spirit of a people.

Day after day Eric spent within their environments, revelling with the eye of an artist in the fantastically carved buildings with their graceful spires and teak-wood facings, and sketching those which most appealed to his fancy, or drinking in the glories of the vegetation, with its varied allurements of shape and colour, from the feathery fronds of the cocoa-nut palms to the green velvet of the tamarinds, or, if the glare became too fierce, resting in the shade of some broad-leaved tree, lulled by

the incessant hum of the insects and the sound of the temple bells, as they swayed in the gentle breeze.

This was the true East of which he had dreamed, and from a temperament such as his it struck a whole gamut of emotions, from the passionate thrill of ecstasy to the lethargy of the lotus-eater. It was the influence of this place which probably accounted more than anything else he saw for something that happened within the next week or two, and which affected other lives than his own.

One day he received an invitation from the Forsyths to accompany them to the top of Mandalay Hill to see the sunset. On the road they passed a number of native girls on their way to the temple, and his hostess, with a recollection of that day in Rangoon when she had seen Eric at the pagoda talking to two such maidens, teasingly said:

"Mind you don't fall in love with one of these pretty creatures."

Eric laughed. "It's a good thing I am in love already."

He spoke as if in fun, but Mrs Forsyth detected an element of truth in the remark and rallied him about it, but could get nothing further out of him. And in a few minutes he had forgotten the matter, for they had reached the summit, and one of the most magnificent views in the world lay in one vast panorama before their eyes. To the east the broken outlines of the Shan Hills, peak after peak almost to the borders of China; to the south, as far as the eye could see, the limitless teak forests; below them the ancient city itself, with its four great walls surrounded by a moat; and to the west the upper reaches of the Irrawaddy gleaming in the red and gold of the setting sun, at that moment dipping down in a flame of glory behind the great

hummocks of the Yoma Mountains in the background.

Captain Forsyth pointed out the different objects within view. Eric was transported with the beauty of it, and Mrs Forsyth was puzzling her brains as to whom he was in love with.

Had Blanche really had a stroke of luck at last? she reflected. Eric had never said anything as to any attachment at home, and if he had been engaged or anything of that sort, she argued, they would surely have heard of it. She sat there with that far-away look in her expressive eyes, apparently engrossed with the beauty of the scene, just as she had stood on the steamer's deck on the day when we first made her acquaintance, but as on that occasion her thoughts were busy in other directions. The result of her deliberations was that as they rose to begin the descent she smiled gently to herself and inwardly remarked, "It must be Blanche. I don't see who else it could be." An easy form of reasoning, but one that is not always correct.

A few days later Eric, in return for their hospitality, invited the Captain and his wife to dine with him at his hotel. As they chatted in his private sitting-room, waiting for dinner to be served, Mrs Forsyth saw a photograph standing on a table near at hand. Taking it up, she asked if it was his sister.

"No, that is my fiancée," Eric replied. "Marian Barclay is her name."

Mrs Forsyth said how very interesting, and made the usual complimentary remarks, which in this case had the novelty of being genuine, for she liked the girl's face, and her congratulations, as she told him he was a very fortunate man, were perfectly sincere.

She continued to look at it, partly because she was taken with it, and partly to avoid meeting her husband's gaze, for she knew he was chuckling to himself with great satisfaction. She had told him of her discovery as to Mr Rankin having fallen in love with Blanche Watson, and he had laughed at her and said that the grounds of her reasoning were insufficient, although he put it in much plainer language than that.

A couple of hours later, after they had said good-bye to Eric and were driving home, Captain Forsyth indulged in a guffaw at his wife's expense, and she herself was bound to laugh.

"After I had arranged it all so nicely too, and was congratulating myself that I had done Blanche a good turn," she giggled.

"Serve you right, you chronic little match-maker," her spouse replied.

Meanwhile the man they had just left was sitting with the photo in his hand, and as he gazed at it he was conscious of a change that had come over him since he had arrived at this place. Up to that time Marian had been by his side in fancy wherever he had gone, especially during those five restful days on the river, and whenever anything had particularly pleased him his first thought and his one regret had been that she was not there to share it with him. Now he realised with a pang how little she had been in his mind during the past ten days. The East had obsessed his brain, excluding to a great extent the thought of one whom he had held dearer than all else on earth beside.

It should not happen again, he told himself emphatically. And during the remainder of his stay in Mandalay he took care that Marian should accompany him in spirit wherever he went. Yet although he kept her in mind it was with this

difference, that now it was an effort to do so, whereas previously it had seemed natural and inevitable that she should be by his side, and this fact both pained and puzzled him. His love for her had not changed, he knew quite well. Surely, he thought, he had not changed? What then was it that was wrong?

A man who has fallen into the water often finds it difficult on coming to the surface to make out his whereabouts, and will strike out in the wrong direction, whereas the watchers on the bank can define his position at a glance. And those who watch the workings of a man's mind can detect the fault, while the man himself is hopelessly bewildered.

It was not Eric's love for Marian that had changed, nor was it so much he himself who had altered; it was simply that he had shifted his centre and was now, in thought and feeling, living in another world from that in which he had been brought up, a world to which Marian Barclay did not belong, and in which she had no part.

CHAPTER XXIV

A BITTER CONTEST

SEVEN o'clock in the morning, and the straight, broad West Road by the side of the moat which surrounds the old town in Mandalay lay white and clear in the bright sunshine save for two figures on horseback and the cloud of dust that rose up behind them. As they drew nearer one of the figures is seen to be the erect, military form of Captain Forsyth, and the other the slim, graceful one of his wife.

"Mr Rankin was due back from his trip to the Ruby mines last night," Mrs Forsyth was saying. "He is sure to call to-day as he leaves for Rangoon to-morrow morning. He is going to spend a week with the Watsons before sailing for home. And by-the-bye I had a letter from Blanche the other day and she seems to be feeling rather hurt with the young man because he has never written to her since he left them, only a note to her mother thanking them for their hospitality. Do you know, I can't help wondering if I ought to tell her that Mr Rankin is engaged to a girl at home?"

"Better leave them alone," her husband counselled. "You never get any thanks for interfering in these matters."

Mrs Forsyth was silent, for she was trying to negotiate another problem in her busy little mind. Should she warn Eric that Blanche was a young lady with whom it was well for eligible men to be careful in their dealings? Yet such a course

seemed like treachery to a friend, especially after all the nice things she herself had said of Blanche to Eric during the voyage. To put him on Miss Watson's track and then warn him off appeared somewhat inconsistent. Yet the fact that she had praised Blanche to him on every possible occasion gave her an uncomfortable feeling that she had incurred a certain amount of responsibility in case any complications took place in his love-affairs. Finally she wisely decided to leave things as they were.

Just then she became aware of the approach of a horseman, and recognised Eric Rankin on his sturdy Burmese pony. They stopped and greeted him kindly, and he turned his pony's head and rode with them.

"You have had a good time up north, I hope?" Mrs Forsyth asked him.

"Splendid," Eric replied. "The scenery in the defiles is magnificent, and I have got some lovely rubies for my sisters and another young lady, too."

"Well, mind you don't give them all away before you get home," she said. "You might let us see them, but I should advise you not to show them to anyone else at all. It is rather awkward to refuse offering to give people one or two if they admire them very much."

So after all in one point at least Mrs Forsyth did warn him against her very dear friend Blanche.

"I was going to call on you to say good-bye to-day," Eric told her.

"Then come to dinner this evening and go with us to the military tattoo in the gardens afterwards. It is to be on an exceptionally fine scale for the Viceroy is here, as you have probably heard, so you must not miss it on any account."

Eric thanked her and accepted the invitation, though in his heart he had wished to reserve this his last evening in Mandalay for a quiet walk on his own account through those very gardens which had so strangely fascinated him. However, he could go there in the late afternoon and say his long farewell to them in solitude. Consequently at four o'clock he got into his dogcart and set off, first, however, paying a visit to that other scene which, next to those gardens, had made such an impression upon him. He drove therefore to Mandalay Hill, and as he stood on the summit and gazed round at the magnificent panorama, it was not only the view itself which held him spell-bound but the thought which it conjured up within his mind. He looked out over the great plain, with its innumerable temples and shrines, pagodas and palaces, and the stillness which brooded over it all seemed to him as the symbol of naturity. Here, he thought, and not in the blatant, restless, ever-changing West, lay the centre of the world's civilisation. He turned his gaze to the mountains in the north, rolling in great billows to meet the still higher peaks of that thousand-mile range that bounds the whole of Central Asia; and this, he reflected, was the cradle of the world's history. It is just as it appeals to every Eastern mind, and, though he did not know it, Eric Rankin's mind was gradually but surely becoming orientalised.

He had to turn his back upon it at last, and soon he entered the gates of the Palace Gardens. The sun was still blazing hot, and for a time he rested beneath the grateful shade of a mango tree, listening to the murmur of the watercourse made by a king for the pleasure of kings. Then he strolled through the gilded palaces, and saw once more the splendour of the great throne-room. He sauntered

to where the Queen's palace stood in all its graceful beauty, and sat by the side of the cool marble baths where maids-of-honour had been wont to perform their open-air ablutions.

And he lingered by the lotus-pond, hidden by the great round leaves of deepest green, until the whole gardens were suddenly dyed red and gold in the rays of the setting sun, and a few minutes later the light went out from the sky and the darkness stole swiftly over the scene, and the sapphire of the sky above became a blue-black velvet dome with the stars, like golden balls, dangling from it.

And he was not alone, for the departed spirits of the exiled inhabitants came out in his fancy to populate it once more; the King with his vast retinue, the Queen with her maids, and all the ancient splendours of the place resumed their sway.

At last, with a sigh, he had to retrace his steps and hurry to his hotel to dress for dinner. He was to come here again in a couple of hours' time, but he looked upon this visit as his farewell to this entrancing spot.

Dinner was soon over, and in company with his host and hostess he drove back to the gardens, and as they passed beneath the arch of the watch-tower a blaze of light and colour met their sight. The sparkling fireflies of every hue that flashed from point to point were supplemented by hundreds of Chinese lanterns, and by the gay dresses of the ladies and the brilliant uniforms of the military. The myriad sounds of the tropic night were accompanied, not drowned, by the strains of regimental bands. The soft calls of native servants to one another in Burmese, Hindustani, and a dozen other languages mingled with the English laughter and English talk.

A strange mixture of East and West, yet not

inharmonious. But there was another East and West—that in Eric Rankin's breast—and this was no harmonious blend, but a fierce and bitter contest. Even while he chatted to the various people he was introduced to he felt this conflict going on within him, and he wondered in a strangely extraneous manner which was going to win. At one moment it seemed to him as though these Britishers were but illusions in his brain, and the spirits which he had seen hovering around their ancient dwelling-places were the real characters.

Then the strains of "Home Sweet Home" floated out over the evening air, recalling long-lost memories and bringing a dimness into many an eye, as it always does. And the sound of that old tune was a powerful ally to one of the conflicting forces within Eric Rankin's blood. Then the laughter and the talk began once more, until a decorous hush fell over the whole assembly as the massed bands played "Abide With Me." After that a pause, and then they struck up the first bars of that tune which sends every Britisher's hand instinctively to his hat, and every civilian stood bareheaded and every soldier stiff at attention, and the thrill of Empire passed through the great silent, motionless throng.

"Good-bye, Mr Rankin, and we are very sorry to lose you."

"Good-bye to both of you, and many, many thanks for all your kindness." And Eric waved his hat to the Forsyths until they passed out of sight. Then he drove back to his hotel with grateful thoughts of these good-hearted people who had done so much to make his stay a pleasant one.

He sat in his room thinking of this wonderful visit that was so nearly at an end. The melodies he had heard that night had brought the West, and

all he held dear there, very near to him. For long he sat with Marian's photo in his hand. Only a week more and he would be on the sea, with every turn of the screw bringing him nearer to the girl he loved. And a fierce longing came over him to take her in his arms and to kiss those dear lips, and he began to count the days until that blessed privilege should be his.

Surely the West had triumphed at last! But the East was not to give in without a struggle, and before many hours were over was to make one last desperate effort, infinitely more strenuous than any that had gone before, to keep him for herself and to tear him from his allegiance to the land of his birth. The contest was not yet decided, was still going on, and the question remained to be settled as to which would win.

CHAPTER XXV

THE GRIP OF THE EAST

THE morning of Eric's departure from Mandalay had come, and he was just setting off for the station when a letter was put into his hand, and on glancing at the address he recognised Marian's handwriting. There was no time to read it then, so he put it into his pocket to read in the train.

The luggage had been safely stowed away under the direction of the faithful Romi-Somi, the whistle sounded, and the train steamed out on its twenty-four hours' journey to Rangoon. Yet the letter was not opened at once, for the traveller's eyes were fixed in one lingering look at the white city glittering in the dazzling sunshine. It was only when a curve in the line hid it from his sight and the train plunged into the forest that Eric tore open the envelope and began to peruse its contents.

Something in those contents must surely be puzzling him, for his expression was certainly not that of a lover reading an ardent letter from his beloved. When he reached the end, and began to read it over again, his brows contracted somewhat, and he looked as though he did not know what to make of it. The letter was much shorter than usual, and the terms of endearment and expressions of regret at his absence, which had been a prominent feature in all Marian's previous communications, were missing in this one. It was stilted and almost too polite. To be sure there was no one phrase or word that he could pick out as

significant of what he felt as he read it, but the whole tone of it surprised him.

He had never seen Marian in a temper, and assuredly had never known her to be sarcastic, but throughout the whole of this letter there was an unmistakable suggestion of both. And this notion was no delusion on his part, for the letter was in answer to the one Marian had received from him at the New Year, which had so bitterly disappointed her by his apparent indifference towards herself.

The unfortunate part of it was that her reply turned up just when it did. It would have been better for all concerned if it had never been forwarded from Rangoon. She had only meant to let him see that she was disappointed, whereas the result of writing as she had done was to dim the memory of her face in his mind just when that memory meant so much to him, more indeed than he had any idea of.

The night before, with the old home-tunes ringing in his ears and Marian's photo in his hand before his eyes, it had seemed to him that this train in which he was to travel could not go fast enough. Now it seemed as though it were rushing him away from all that held sway in his mind. The anticipation of his home-going had lost some of its brightness since he had read that letter, and the spell of the East began to resume its sway in his mind.

He looked out of the window as they passed through the forest, whose deep greenery was lit up here and there by the sunlight which glinted through the dense foliage. Now and then, in the very heart of the woods, ruined pagodas would come into view, suggestive of some town or village that had crumbled and passed into oblivion

through the destroying hand of fire or the decay of time. Then the forest was left behind and they were passing through mountain ranges with every peak surmounted by its shrine.

Two hours of this, and a curve brought them into a peaceful valley, basking in the sunshine, and the jungle all around them. At that time the line was a mere track through that jungle which, so soon as the hand of the ganger had been removed, had crept swiftly back to the very edge of the rails, so that the traveller had but to put out his hand and he might pluck blooms of surpassing beauty and orchids of incredible size. They passed numerous little villages whose inhabitants, from the old grandfather to the toddling child, would run out to see this new and mysterious *Mee-yah-tah*, as they called it, which moved so unaccountably without bullocks to draw it. As the afternoon wore on the boys could be seen riding the huge buffaloes to water, thumping them with their bamboo sticks, which made about as much impression on the bovine hide as a wisp of straw would have done. And sometimes a Burmese lover and his sweetheart might be seen wandering hand in hand, oblivious to everything except their love.

As Eric Rankin saw all this, and more, passing before his eyes, his soul was moved by the æsthetic beauty of it, and he was stirred to the inmost depths of his being by the inner meaning of it. The pagodas with which the whole land was dotted were to him the symbols of a religion which had taken a greater hold upon him of late than he had been aware of. He had often talked with the monks in the various temples he had visited. He had done so simply with a view of gaining information, but their tenets had permeated his soul. He re-

membered with a shock that he had lost count of Sundays, and when a Scotsman who has been religiously brought-up has done that, his ideas have become very far removed from the faith in which he has been nurtured.

As he gazed over this fertile, sunny land he thought of his native country, of which he had always been so proud, and it seemed to him now as a barren desert, and the disloyalty of the thought caused a flush of shame to rise to his cheeks. There is a glow of life in the Tropics which is apt to make the rest of the world pale and insipid in comparison. The ground teems with it. You dig up a patch in the jungle, and if you go back in a week you cannot find it: the overwhelming fecundity of the earth has obliterated it. You build a hut, and in a fortnight it is covered with flowering creepers. You lay your friend in his last resting-place, but you need not plant his grave with flowers, for Nature will speedily do it for you.

The sunshine quivers and the very air palpitates with life. And with all this life there is colour, for Nature, which tints her handiwork in colder latitudes, splashes the paint on the tropical birds and flowers with a lavish and unsparing hand. Little wonder that the man whose soul was steeped in all this wealth of beauty looked forward with misgiving to the long, dreary winters and the short, uncertain summers that awaited him at home.

And the thought of the life there affected him no less profoundly than that of the climate. It was not only his own uncongenial work that was distasteful, but the idea of Western life in general. The hurry and bustle of it seemed to him unbearable after the peaceful quiet of these jungle villages

lying so calm and restful in the afternoon sunshine. The mad rush for wealth seemed a shameful thing after living among these contented people, who were amply satisfied so long as they had just enough to go on with, and were ready, if there ever was a surplus, to share it with their neighbours. The scramble for fame and notoriety—every man pushing himself forward and others back—appeared a criminal thing compared with the kind-heartedness of this people, whose motto in life was "Live and let live."

All through the noonday glare, all through the burning heat of the afternoon, he sat gazing out of the window, while these and many other like thoughts passed through his mind. Then suddenly the whole jungle burst into a flame of vivid red as the sun dropped towards the summit of the great mountains, and as it sank behind them the crimson glare faded as quickly as it had come, and the night which fell over the scene was more bewitching than the day itself. Hunger alone compelled him to tear himself away when they stopped at Yamethen for dinner, and, the meal dispatched, he resumed his seat and gazed out once more at the jungle slipping by, weirdly beautiful in the warm night.

"Will the sahib condescend to take supper?" said Romi-Somi.

The train was at a standstill in the station of Toungoo, where this halt is made to enable the traveller to refresh himself before turning into his sleeping-bunk for the night.

Eric did not want any supper for he could not bear to lose one moment of this, his last view of the jungle. By this time to-morrow he would be at Rangoon, which, with its savour of commercialism and its never-ending social functions,

seemed terribly commonplace after the experiences of the last few weeks, and he would avail himself of his privileges to the very last moment.

He walked back and forward along the platform, which at that time was little more than a rustic stopping-place, and as he did so all the sights and sounds of that mysterious, fascinating land assailed him with a vehemence that he could not resist. The train was ready to start, and it was then the East put forth her last and greatest effort to detain him.

There is no sense so intimately connected with the working of the mind as that of smell. And as Eric Rankin stood there the gentle night breeze brought to his nostrils the scent of the jungle, which resembles none other on earth. Like the curry of the country, it is a blend of many things, and of none in particular—wood-fires, resinous plants, waxy blooms, and I know not what else beside—and the man who has once inhaled it will never lose the memory of it. He may return to colder climates and leave it far, far behind him, but at some time or other, twenty years afterwards it may be, it will come to him again, and his soul will long to go back to the place.

As Eric breathed in that strange odour he felt as a man may feel who is going under an anæsthetic, as though his mind were being detached from his body, and so that he has no control over his movements. It was the last desperate tug of the East at his soul.

“Will the sahib condescend to take his seat; the train is about to start,” the voice of Romi-Somi spoke once more.

The sound recalled him to himself, and as he stepped on to the footboard of the carriage he turned to take one long breath of the warm, odor-

ous night, one last look at the scene around him. Then he sprang into the compartment, seized his kit-bag and gun-case, and jumped back on to the platform as the train glided away into the darkness.

CHAPTER XXVI

A FROSTY DAY

BLUE skies again, not the deep indigo of the Tropics, but the clear pellucid blue of a frosty day in Scotland, and a bracing atmosphere ringing with the whir of skates and the cheery laughter of the skaters. A day to make the poorest heart rejoice, and it must have exerted some magic influence on Marian Barclay, for as she glided round in company with a girl friend her cheeks were in a glow, and her eyes sparkled as they used to do in the days when she was her old happy self.

"Either the change in the weather has done Marian good," said Miller to Janet, as they caught sight of her, "or else something auspicious has happened."

"Well, let us hope that whatever has been wrong has come right again," she replied.

They made their way to her, and as she greeted them her voice had a ring in it that they had not heard for many a day.

"Well, nurse," she called out; "neglecting your patient as usual?"

"Oh, I've been dismissed, for the afternoon at least," the amateur nurse replied. "Elsie is getting on well and would not hear of my staying in on such a glorious day."

Marian had been a sore puzzle to Miller of late. Her pale cheeks and air of languor, and, above all, her apathy and want of interest in what was

going on, and her reserve in speaking of Eric, had convinced the observant doctor that the course of true love was not so smooth as it might have been. He had discussed the question with Janet, but their deliberations had always ended at the point at which they had begun, and they could not come to any conclusion. Still, as Janet had remarked, whatever had been wrong must have come right. Which was exactly what it had not done.

They stayed on the ice until it was too dark to see, and then walked back to the Rankins' house. Janet wished to be with her patient, as she and Miller were going to the orchestral concert in the evening, she told Marian. "And why don't you come too?" Miller added; "it would do you good, and you would be able to act as chaperon to such a giddy young couple as ourselves." So it was arranged that she should go, and after they had seen Janet safely indoors Miller walked home with Marian.

"It's a treat to see you looking so well to-day," he said to her as they were walking along. "You have seemed altogether out of sorts lately. Whatever has been the matter with you?"

"Oh, nothing at all," she replied; "I must have been a bit run down, the weather has been so atrocious up to the last few days."

She spoke hurriedly, for it was a shock to find that she had not been hiding her troubles so successfully as she had imagined. And nothing that Miller could say in the shape of indirect hints, which might have given her an opening to speak of herself, would bring forth anything more than this. Yet all the time she was longing to lift the veil that was hiding the sorrows of her maiden heart, as she had been longing to speak to her

mother all that morning and yet had been deterred from doing so, and for two reasons.

Mrs Barclay had seemed more careworn and tired than usual of late, chiefly owing to the fact that her husband had been almost unbearable since Marian had become engaged to Eric, and also because her motherly eyes had not failed to see that Marian had not been herself. On that very day, as she had been sitting with her daughter, she had tried to probe this girl's heart, and had given her the same opening that Miller had done by remarking on her pale, tired looks. Marian had felt sorely tempted to tell her mother everything, but out of the kindness of her heart had not dared to speak of what was troubling her, for fear of adding to her mother's worries.

Another consideration which had influenced her was the fact that Eric's third letter was due in a few days, for this was nearly the end of January, the 23rd to be precise. And the coming letter, she reflected with an almost superstitious dread, would have an even more decisive bearing on her future and its prospects than had the last one. At any rate, she would wait for it before she said anything to anyone.

Then Mrs Barclay had suggested that she should spend the afternoon on the ice, and so it came about that Marian called for a girl friend and went off to skate, with the beneficial results we have just seen, and returned home in a very different frame of mind from that in which she had set out. The exhilaration of skimming through the clear, crisp air had blown away some of the cobwebs, and the concert swept away still more; for, from the moment when the first bars of the overture crashed through the hall until the final chords of the last piece died into a silence that

could be felt, she was lifted right out of herself and the groove in which for so many weeks her mind had been dwelling.

When she arrived home that night, for the second time under Miller's escort, an unwonted sense of elation ran through her veins. Life was bright and joyous after all, she said to herself, and the future must surely be bright and joyous too. She would be more reasonable, she determined, and would not expect too much. So she had, somehow or other, learned that lesson after all. And she would be patient and keep an open mind until Eric had had the chance of clearing himself by refuting the statements which Lerman had attributed to him. Lerman! The very name brought back to her something of the old doubts, and those doubts were as clouds on the clear sky of the future she had been trying to conjure up, and a premonition of dark days to come.

The stormy petrel had withdrawn to a distance of late but had not passed out of sight.

Two days later the letter arrived, dated from Rangoon, six days after Eric's arrival there. As a glowing description of places and people it was a masterpiece, and under ordinary circumstances would have been termed a thrilling epistle, and might have made an excellent monograph for a magazine of travel or art. Yet the one thing that the girl who was reading it longed for was absent, but she would not let her mind be disturbed by that, for had she not resolved to be reasonable? Then many of the scenes appeared to be associated with, among others, the name of Miss Watson, and, although Eric did not say so in actual words, it would seem that she was a desirable sort of young lady.

Eric Rankin was one of those people who go

through life determined to see the best in everyone they meet, and if there is anything about them they do not care for, to pass it by and dwell rather on their good points, however few in number these may be. It is a most commendable habit, and exerts a salutary influence on the mind of the observer; but it is not always advisable to carry it out when you happen to be writing about one lady to another, who is supposed to be the only girl in the world so far as you are concerned.

Yet Marian was not a jealous girl, and Blanche Watson did not disturb her peace of mind, even although Eric had made the mistake of calling her Blanche instead of Miss Watson once during the course of the letter. He had made this slip through writing in haste to catch the mail, and the signs of his having done so, confirmed by his own statement at the close, were the only things that in any way ruffled Marian. A girl will shut her eyes to a good many things, spoken or unspoken, in a letter from her betrothed, but she never overlooks the fact of his having written in a hurry.

Marian read the letter through again, however, from beginning to end, and then put it away and went about her duties for the rest of the morning without any elation, but in a quietly comfortable frame of mind, and without a presentiment of what was to happen before the day was over.

In the afternoon she went off skating again, and after three enjoyable hours returned home at half-past five in a healthy glow of body and mind. She entered the room where her parents were sitting, and there was a look on their faces which suddenly brought her to a standstill.

"Whatever has happened?" she said.

The question was soon answered, for her father

rose from his chair, and his words made her feel sick and giddy.

"Nice mess your young man seems to be making of things," he told her in a voice which he had meant to be impressive, but which bordered on the melodramatic. "It is just what I have always said: he is not to be trusted. He proposed to you on the spur of the moment and you know yourself that he has been anything but attentive to you ever since."

This evidently because Eric had only visited her once a week in unwilling obedience to Mr Barclay's own peremptory orders.

"I told you," he went on to say, "what he said about your engagement that night at the Club, but you would not listen to me. Now tell me what you think of this," and he handed her a letter. "Maurice showed it to me because he felt it his duty to do so, and was very averse to my saying anything about it to you, but I insisted on doing so and also of bringing the letter itself, as I knew that nothing else would convince you."

With a face as white as the paper Marian read the note, which began, "My dear Maurice," and ended, "Yours sincerely, Blanche Watson."

It was a ladylike letter—a ladylike letter, observe, not the letter of a lady, as the two terms are by no means synonymous—and it started by thanking him for the *great kindness*, underlined, which he had done her. Marian was not aware what the great kindness was, and would have been surprised beyond measure had she known that it had formed part of a plot, originating in Lerman's fertile brain, for nullifying Eric's engagement to Marian by the very simple process of getting him to fall in love with someone else. No more suitable decoy for the purpose could be imagined,

Lerman had declared to himself, for Blanche Watson had what was in his eyes the highest recommendation in that direction. As he put it to himself, while soliloquising by the fire one evening, a girl who could get Maurice Lerman to make a fool of himself would have little trouble with a credulous ass like Rankin, as he was so kind as to designate him.

Marian did not know either that the underlining was done in a moment of bitter and sarcastic spite.

The letter went on to say that Mr Rankin had arrived a week before the date of writing, and they were all charmed with him. As it was through Mr Lerman's letter that they had made Mr Rankin's acquaintance, she thought it only right to tell him that if he heard that their visitor had become something more than a friend to herself he must not be surprised. Although, as he knew, she was the last girl in the world to be silly and imagine things, yet Mr Rankin's attentions to her during the whole week had been so marked as to be unmistakable. In fact everybody was talking about them. Father and mother were both very pleased, as they were as fond of him as if he were their own son, etc.

Marian handed back the letter to her father and without a word left the room. If she had been asked what she felt like it is doubtful if she could have found a word to describe her sensations. She was not angry, was not disappointed, was not stunned. Rather she was like a person who is just coming out of chloroform: the old self has gone, and they are unable to identify either themselves or their surroundings.

Next morning she wrote a letter to Eric, and her hand was as steady as a rock while she was writing. It is only slight emotions that make us

tremulous, the more intense ones having no such effect. She went out and posted it herself, and the next moment bitterly regretted it, and would have given much to get it back.

She need not have worried about it, for Eric never received it.

CHAPTER XXVII

THE RIVAL

THE London express was flying southwards beneath threatening steel-grey skies, and the bitter north-east wind blew in great gusts that brought with them the flying scud that encrusted the windows of the carriages. Beattock with its snow-clad hills had been left behind, and the battlements of Carlisle Castle could be seen dimly appearing on the horizon. It was a wild February day, but the four passengers in the snug first-class compartment paid little heed to it. They were on their way to Bournemouth in search of warmth and sunshine.

As soon as Elsie Rankin had sufficiently recovered Dr Miller had proposed that she should go to Bournemouth for the rest of the winter. Hence it was arranged that Janet and she were to travel down with the medical man as escort, and Mr Rankin was to join them when he found it possible to get away. Then it had been suggested that if Marian were to go too she would be company for the girls, and it would do her good too, for she had seemed far from well the last week or two. They were anxious about her, and could not make out what was the matter, for she would not own up to being out of sorts. They knew nothing of the fateful letter which had come like a bombshell into her young life. She herself would have cut off her right hand rather than tell them of it; and her mother had to keep silent

on the point, in obedience to her husband's commands. That individual himself had said nothing about it outside his own house, as it suited his plans much better to let things take their course. Lerman, the instigator of all the trouble, had refrained from opening his mouth on the subject for identically the same reason.

Hence it happened that the Rankins were at a loss to account for Marian's lack of spirits. They knew that she missed Eric, and had an idea that things were not as they should be, but beyond vague conjectures they could not ascertain anything more.

Carlisle had vanished into the distance this half-hour past, and on either side of the train were the Westmoreland Fells, their great hummocks covered in snow. Miller looked out of the window and said: "Just imagine Eric living in sweltering heat and blazing sunshine."

"How poetic he is getting," Janet remarked. "His powers of imagery are too marvellous for words."

"If you have quite finished," Miller said, "I was going to add what a pity it is that we cannot fly there on a magic carpet like they did in the 'Arabian Nights.' Wouldn't it be a surprise for Eric if we all suddenly dropped in on him?"

"It would," Marian said, and for a moment a shade of hardness came over her face as she reflected that she was the only member of the party who knew that his astonishment would have taken the form of consternation rather than delight.

Two days later Elsie and Marian sat together in the Invalids' Walk, that sheltered spot where the wind seems ever to be tempered to the shorn lamb. Janet and Miller had gone for a stroll, and this was the first uninterrupted chat these two girls had had

since Elsie was first taken ill. They watched the children sailing their tiny boats in the stream, and glanced at the passers-by, many of them with that mingled look of wealth and woe which is seen more at Bournemouth than anywhere else; wasted forms with every comfort that money can buy, and yet with the signs of a fell disease on their faces. They talked of many things until at last Elsie began to speak of Eric, and she did so with a definite purpose. She too had noticed the reserve which crept into Marian's manner and showed itself even in the tones of her voice at the mention of his name, and to-day she was determined to get at the root of the matter. Paying no heed to Marian's diffidence she went straight to the point.

"What is the matter with you and Eric?" she said. "Has something gone wrong?"

Marian looked away with a face that might have been carved out of stone. Then the flood-gates of her heart burst open, and as the tears sprang to her eyes she said, "Everything's wrong," but would say no more until Elsie in her own gentle way said to her: "You know that Eric always calls me 'Little Mother,' and tells me his troubles, and why can't you do the same? If you wish it, I will promise to say nothing of what you tell me to anyone else."

So Marian told her the whole story: what her father had heard and Lerman had heard, and Eric's apparent indifference to her in his letters, and lastly, most condemning of all, the communication from Miss Watson. Strung together, they formed a formidable array of indictments, and when they came to an end Elsie looked out over the gardens with a face that was troubled and sorely perplexed.

"I can't understand it," she said at last.

“ There must be some mistake about what he is reputed to have said about you, but that letter from Miss Watson—— ” and for a few moments she hesitated——“ surely no girl would dare to write like that unless she—— ” but she could not finish the sentence. Elsie knew Eric better than anyone else did, and was proud of his straightforwardness and honesty, but she could not blind herself to the fact that his sanguine nature would be only too likely to make him an easy prey to the artfulness of any designing woman. Not that he would deliberately do anything that was not right towards the girl he was engaged to, but his boyish open-heartedness might easily lead him unwittingly into some entanglement from which it would be difficult to escape.

She scarcely knew what to say to her friend, and her very hesitation confirmed Marian’s doubts. The only suggestion she could make was that it would be only right to wait until he had a chance of speaking up for himself. Writing, she wisely said, would only tend to complicate matters still worse. She could say no more than this, yet her sympathy was grateful to the troubled girl, and as they walked back to the hotel for lunch Marian felt lighter-hearted because of it. And the relief of having unburdened her heart made that day and the remaining days of her fortnight’s visit vastly more enjoyable than they would have otherwise been.

Yet they were both on a wrong scent. Marian had a rival, but it was not Blanche Watson, with whom Eric was certainly not in love, and whom he merely tolerated. It was something else altogether that was threatening to take possession of his heart and to dim the memory of Marian’s face from his mind. It was none other than the Spirit

of the East, which had wooed him from afar, had put on her loveliest garb to meet him, and had intoxicated his senses with her luscious beauty, the fragrance of her scents, and the soul-drawing melody of the sounds that whispered throughout the mazes of her jungles and the depths of her forest glades. It was the East, which, in a fit of mad jealousy, had at last clutched at his heart-strings, and drawing him back to herself had enfolded him in her embrace.

Had Marian's mind not been set upon a wrong track, it might have enabled her to read with greater discernment the two letters which came from Eric while she was at Bournemouth. In them he made no further mention of Miss Watson, due to the fact that he had not seen or thought of her again, but to Marian's mind his very silence on this score was more significant than anything he might have said about her. Had she been able to read those letters aright they would have shown her clearly and unmistakably his ever-growing fascination for the land through which he was passing.

The visit to Bournemouth came to an end all too soon, and one morning she had to bid the two sisters farewell and entrain for home.

After a long, weary journey she arrived at the Central Station in Glasgow once more. As she stepped on to the platform and looked round for her father a voice behind her said: "Well, Marian, you have had a comfortable journey, I hope," and looking round she saw, not her father, but Lerman.

"I was looking for my father," she said; "he must be farther down the platform," and her manner was anything but genial. She was feeling doubly annoyed, in the first place because Lerman

was there, and, more than that, because he had had the presumption, for the first time in his life, to call her by her Christian name.

"He was tired to-night, so asked me to come instead of him," Lerman replied, utterly unruffled by her demeanour. As they drove home he chatted to her, absolutely indifferent to the chilling silence with which she greeted all his remarks.

If her tongue was silent her mind was busy as she looked ahead and saw what she must expect in the future, realising with a stab of anger that she would be constantly subjected to the worry of Lerman's attentions, backed up by her father's approval.

The future amply justified her forebodings, for from that time Lerman had the run of the house, and availed himself of it in the guise of a suitor, not an accepted one it is true, but one whose advances he took it for granted, or pretended to do so, were not unwelcome. He continued to call her, as he had done on that night at the station, by her Christian name, and nothing she could say or do appeared to have the slightest effect in diminishing the extraordinary amount of self-confidence which he exhibited when in her presence.

Poor Mrs Barclay, who was in failing health and had to spend much of her time in her room, a circumstance which increased Lerman's opportunities and added to Marian's discomfort, did at last raise her voice in protest. It was on an occasion when he arrived with two tickets for a concert and asked Marian to accompany him. She refused his offer, upon which her father said angrily: "Of course you will go, when Maurice is so kind as to ask you."

It was then that Mrs Barclay asserted her rights as a mother,

“Marian will not go if she does not want,” she said. “I am surprised that you should wish her to go off like that without any chaperon.”

So she was saved that annoyance, though it meant putting up with an outburst from her father so soon as he had the chance of speech with her alone.

“Why don’t you behave politely to a guest?” he said. “I wonder that he puts up with your rudeness. Mind in future that you are more civil to Maurice.”

“To Mr Lerman, you mean,” was her chilling rejoinder as she got up and left the room.

Early in March another letter arrived from Eric. It was an eventful one, not from anything that it contained, but because it was the last that she received from him.

CHAPTER XXVIII

THE LONG SILENCE

MARCH is usually regarded as a boisterous month, and the mention of it is apt to conjure up in the mind the thought of storms and gusts and rattling windows. But to the girl who waited week by week for news of her lover it seemed as though the whole world had suddenly become mute. Her face grew pale and drawn with anxiety, and each time the postman came to the door she would give a start, hoping that the long-looked-for letter had arrived, and each time doomed to suffer the same sickening sense of disappointment.

Others were inclined to look upon it as pure neglect on Eric's part, and Mr Rankin waxed indignant at his carelessness, as he called it, for Eric had not replied to a business communication which had needed an immediate answer. To Marian, however, the matter savoured of something vastly more serious than simple oversight, and lines of care began to show themselves in her face, and her eyes grew heavy with want of sleep.

Elsie was the only other member of the family who could share Marian's point of view, and her presence would have been a godsend to the distracted girl at this period, but she was still at Bournemouth, and could express her sympathy merely by letter, which is a poor substitute for speech.

The only sympathetic words she heard were from

the least desirable quarter, for Lerman had not failed to make ample use of the golden opportunities which Eric's silence had afforded him. Marian never discussed the subject with him, but he seemed able to read her inmost thoughts, and would give expression to them in a way that startled her. The notion had come to her that Eric was dead. She had often heard of the dangers of tropical life, dangers not only from man and beast but also from dire diseases that attacked and slew almost in the same hour. She began to be convinced that some such fate had happened to him in some out-of-the-way place where no one knew his name, and that the mystery would never be cleared up. She did not mention her thought to a single person, but Lerman voiced it for her one evening when they chanced to be alone.

"It is terribly worrying for you," he told her, "this silence of Eric's. It is all the more mysterious as there is no doubt he is alive. He is a strong fellow, quite capable of looking after himself, and, besides, if anything had happened to him we should have heard of it. There is constant communication throughout the country, even in the most remote parts, and such a thing could not have occurred without coming to the ears of the authorities."

It might be thought that it would have suited his purpose better to have agreed with her presentiments, and thus have left the field clear for himself as it were. But Maurice Lerman was too clever to fall into such an error. He knew, and no one better, that a girl will generally remain true to the memory of a dead lover, but the most honourable of her sex will often, in a moment of pique, transfer her affections from one who has proved unfaithful to her; and this idea, by subtle

hints and artful suggestions, he sought to implant in Marian's mind.

He always spoke regretfully, and a note of tender sympathy ran through all his speech, and he showed her every consideration and made himself as indispensable as possible to her. His eyes acquired a look of gentle pity, and when he shook hands with her he often took longer than was necessary over the process. Yet by a cunning phrase, a skilful word here and there, he doled out the poison that he had determined should kill this girl's love for Eric Rankin and secure it for his own.

When the third week had gone by and nothing had been heard of the absent one Mr Rankin began to grow anxious too, and sent a cable to a business friend in Rangoon, one of those with whom Eric had had dealings, and on the following day the reply came. It was in code, but, translated ran in this wise:—

“Son left Mandalay for Rangoon on February third; left train at Toungoo; not since heard of. Must have gone into jungle.”

Half an hour later Marian Barclay, happening to look out of the window, was surprised to see Mr Rankin walking up the path. It was not often that he came to their house, but never before, to her recollection, had he called at this hour of the morning, and her heart contracted with a spasm of fear as she concluded that only one piece of news, and that the worst, could have brought him. Yet it was not what she had dreaded, but something even more perplexing, if not so hopelessly terrible, that he had to tell her.

“Tell me at once what you have heard,” she beseeched him.

So he did not beat about the bush, but simply told her, "Eric disappeared into the jungle two months ago and has not been heard of since."

He put his arm round the girl he loved as one of his own and gently led her into the sitting-room and seated her on the couch. Then he sat beside her with his hand in hers, and the tears ran down his furrowed cheeks. They were the first he had shed since Eric's mother had died many years before.

The sight of his grief-stricken face roused her from her bewilderment, and with a caressing movement she stroked his head and did her best to comfort him, but he was almost inconsolable.

"I blame myself for it all," he said bitterly. "If I had not thwarted him and tried to force him against his will all his life this would never have happened."

And, as he went out and walked down the road with drooping shoulders that made him look as though old age had suddenly come to him, Marian forgot her own troubles and cried to think of his double sorrow, the sorrow of the uncertainty of his son's fate and the bitterness of his reflection that all this trouble might never have happened if he himself had only acted differently in the past.

Three days later Lerman received another letter from Miss Watson complaining of the manner in which Eric Rankin had treated her. He had gone away and never written to her once, and when they were expecting him back on his return from his trip up-country he had not come. Her father had gone to the station to meet him, but only his luggage arrived, and there was no sign of the man himself. P.S.—If that was not a scurvy way to treat a young lady she should like to know what was.

The letter was chiefly remarkable for a super-

fluity of underlining and scarcity of stops, and, while it was expressive, it was not nearly so lady-like as the first one.

The whole affair was wrapped in mystery. Often Marian would lie awake for hours at night trying to picture what had happened to her lover, but her ponderings always led to one point and stopped short there. She would follow him in fancy through different scenes of wonder and interest and through various adventures such as he had told her of in his letters. Then suddenly he would step aside into the denseness of the jungle and the wildest flights of her imagination could not follow him any farther.

CHAPTER XXIX

A JUNGLE RIDE

"HAS anybody heard anything of Rankin yet?" The speaker was one of a group of men sitting on the verandah of the Ghymkana Club in Rangoon and engaged in the consumption of light refreshment.

"Not a word," replied one of the others; "he seems to have been swallowed up."

"What's it all about?" said a third. "I haven't heard anything of it."

"You remember Rankin, fellow from Glasgow, came out for a trip, downright good sort. He's been up-country and was due back here five days ago to spend a week with the Watsons before sailing. He was to arrive at eight o'clock last Thursday morning and Watson went to the station to meet him. The old man's been rather important on the subject of Rankin lately. Blanche must have been whispering in his ear, I fancy, and Pa has developed an air of mystery, rather the heavy father-in-law sort of business, you know. Well, the old man was on the platform when the train came in, fussing about considerably, looking for the expected. However, the expected didn't turn up, and poor Watson was a bit worried, but concluded he must have missed his train. Just then he caught sight of the chap's luggage being chucked out, and the plot began to thicken, as the writer-fellows say. And the plot's been thickening ever since. It appears that he

was seen in the train just before they got to Toungoo, but since then all trace of him has been lost."

"But if he's bolted what's he doing?" said the other man.

"Oh! ask me another," answered the first speaker, adding in an aftertone of worldly wisdom and with his eyes reflectively cast up to the ceiling, "He isn't catching butterflies anyhow."

If those men had only had the gift of second sight they would have seen a vision that would have solved much of the mystery for them. Along a narrow jungle-track, trodden for centuries by the feet of innumerable elephants, many miles to the west of Toungoo and lying between it and the river, a bullock-wagon creaked its way, and in it were seated, in addition to the driver, a tall English sahib and a native boy.

When Rankin sprang out of the train on that eventful night and stood beside Romi-Somi, that piece of Oriental complacency betrayed no surprise. If he reflected at all, he concluded that the great sahib knew best, and he simply stood there and gazed at him as a dog might look up at his master, waiting to see what he was going to do next. There was no sleeping accommodation at hand, and no man in his senses ever goes into the jungle at night, unless he is wishful to commit suicide, so they slept in the little waiting-room and set off at dawn, one carrying the kit-bag and the other the gun-case.

Romi-Somi's luggage consisted of the clothes he stood up in, and not too many of those either. It is a comfortable way of taking your baggage, easy to carry and not liable to get lost.

After making inquiries they found a bullock-wagon driver who was making the journey across-

country to a town on the river a hundred miles away. He was delighted to get hold of such a distinguished passenger, and soon they were jolting along into the heart of the forest.

In making this journey Eric had no plans and no settled destination. Interested as he had been in all that he had observed, he had the feeling that he had only seen the outside of things, and longed to get at the heart of this people. It sounds laudable enough, but it is always a dangerous experiment when applied by a white man to an Eastern race. He had plenty of money in his pockets, too; plenty for the purpose in hand, that is to say. It might not have gone far had he been travelling in Western countries, but in the heart of Burma a little of that commodity goes a long way.

For five days they jogged along, sleeping by night in the dak-bungalows or rest-houses which are found throughout the length and breadth of the land for the accommodation of travellers. Every wayfarer, of whatever nationality he may be, is entitled to board and lodgings in these houses free of cost. Yet this particular traveller never left in the morning without some practical acknowledgment of the hospitality he had received, although it had to be given with great tact, for these Burmans are a proud race. Generally, therefore, it took the form of a donation to the pagoda or a present to the children in the neighbourhood. On this particular morning, however, the fifth of his journey, he had had no opportunity of making any return for his night's rest, and had gone away regretting the fact. He need not have wasted his regrets, for before the day was over he recompensed the kind-hearted villagers in a way that he little expected.

All through the morning they drove along the

grass-grown highway, if such it could be called, Eric frequently getting out to walk, for riding in a bullock-wagon is not a rapid form of progress, and the swaying side-to-side motion of the animals renders it anything but a comfortable one. There was plenty of time, therefore, to watch the gorgeous butterflies and the strangely plumaged birds and to study all the wonders of the dense forest which lined the path on either side and would have soon obliterated it had it not been for the nightly roaming of the elephants which kept the track open.

At midday they rested for a few hours in the shade to escape the intense heat, and then set off once more. The driver was making for a certain village, which he expected to reach before night-fall, and in order to make sure of getting there sooner turned off into a side-track, which, with the unerring instinct of these forest people, he divined to be a more direct route than the one they had been following.

His instinct was correct, but he had not taken into consideration the fact that at one point it was so completely overgrown as to be impassable. By this time the sun was just setting, and it was too late to return to the track they had left. Their position was a serious one, for the district was infested with tigers, which would be astir as soon as the darkness had set in, and that would be in an alarmingly short space of time, for the twilight in those parts is shortlived, and the traveller who is benighted is liable to be shortlived also.

There was nothing to be done but to bivouac there for the night and to light a fire to keep away the wild beasts. Before their preparations were complete the driver started and held up his hand with an ominous whisper of "Tiger."

Eric seized his heavy bore rifle, which he had taken from his case, and a dead silence fell upon the three men. He strained his eyes in the direction in which the driver had pointed, but could neither see nor hear anything. The acute senses of the forest-bred Burman had detected that which was inaudible to the white man, and the increasing terror in the Burman's widely dilated eyes and the direction of his gaze, as it followed a course that led to the edge of the dense undergrowth close to which they were standing, showed that the beast was gradually approaching them. When at last the man stared in a fascinated horror, with his jaw hanging down and his eyes almost out of his head, at the very edge of the jungle, not two yards from where they stood, Eric knew that it was close at hand.

As he peered through the increasing darkness, with every muscle taut and head forward, the rifle at his shoulder and finger on the trigger, he could see nothing, but a weird feeling passed through him that he was being watched by two eyes that were glaring at him from that dense thicket. It is one thing to shoot at a pheasant and miss it; it is another to stand face to face with a tiger. In the one case you lower your record and injure your reputation; in the other you know that of the two things, man and beast, that face one another, within the next few moments one will be dead, and you wonder which it will be.

The seconds, or the minutes, or it might have been the hours, for anything he could tell, the sense of time being effaced on these occasions, passed slowly by. He could not be sure enough of the position of the animal to risk a shot, and thus they waited—the one ready to spring, the other to fire—until it seemed as if eternity itself

must have come. The strain was terrible on arm and eye alike, and the man began to wonder how long he could stand it when suddenly, at the same moment it seemed, a great curled-up beast sprang from the thicket and both barrels of a rifle rang out over the forest, and an Englishman lay on the ground with a huge man-eating tiger on the top of him. It was a living tiger that sprang into the air; it was a dead one that fell on the man who had sent two bullets through its heart.

Romi-Somi and the Burman gave a great yell in concert, and kept it up too, and their howls were of some avail, for in a short time shouts were heard not fifty yards away.

When they had come to an impasse in their track they had little thought that they were within calling distance of the very village they were making for. With grass twelve feet high, to say nothing of the dense mass of bush, tree and creeper all intertwined, a man may be within a few yards of a village and never see it, as the writer can testify from practical experience.

The shouts drew gradually nearer, and a crowd of men with torches made their way through the forest, but not until the driver had assured them that the tiger was dead. They had been awakened by the rifle-shot, and guessed what had happened, but cautiously ascertained the exact position of affairs by calling to the driver before emerging from the friendly shelter of the village palisade. Now they came rushing along with valorous cries, for the Burman is a great hand at shouting and taking the lead when the danger is past. It is one characteristic in which he closely resembles a good many people belonging to Western nations.

They prodded the tiger to make quite sure that he was really defunct, and then dragged the huge

lifeless body from off the man who lay half-smothered beneath it, and assuredly if they had not done so there would have been before long two corpses instead of one lying on the ground. The faithful Romi-Somi wept with joy when he saw that his master was still breathing, and gently and tenderly the men carried him to the village. It was a strange procession that wended its way through the darkness of the forest: the great English sahib, unconscious of what was going on, and the small wiry Burmans sweating under their burden, the crowd that followed talking and gesticulating, and the glare of the torches lighting up the scene with weird effect.

They bore him to the hut of the chief man of the village, and laid him on the mat, which is the only bed a Burman knows; and there he lay, still and insensible save for a moan or two now and then, until the dawn stole over the tree-tops and the warm sunshine lighted up the green sward.

CHAPTER XXX

MA-MI

THE sun was high in the heavens when Romi-Somi, who had never left his master's side the whole night long, saw him move in his sleep. He signalled to the head-man, the Ywa-Thungyi as they call him, who was sitting on the floor at the other side of the hut, and together they stood and watched him until at last to their relief the eyelids of the sleeper flickered, his eyes opened, and he turned over only to sink back with a groan.

From the time they had laid him down on the grass-mat, the very best they were possessed of, Eric had been oblivious to everything until a confused dream came to him, and he thought that he was in a house on fire trying to fight his way out and unable to move a limb. He struggled in vain until the nightmare suddenly came to an end and he made a convulsive movement, and that movement woke him, for it gave him a stab in the side which brought forth the groan that the watchers had heard.

After that he lay still again, with his eyes closed, too tired and aching to stir. In a little while the pain eased off and he opened his eyes once more, and the scene which met his gaze was enough to bewilder him.

It was no wonder that he had dreamt he was in a burning house, for the room in which he found himself was full of blinding smoke. The Burman, the unsophisticated man of the jungle that is

to say, has only one clear idea on the subject of medical treatment, and that is to keep the patient, no matter what his illness may be, as hot as he possibly can. Hence in every case of sickness they close up all the apertures and light a wood or charcoal fire. As there is no chimney or other exit for the smoke, the effect can be better imagined than described.

Recognising Romi-Somi, he ordered him to throw back the bamboo-mats which formed the sides of the hut and to let in the fresh air. As the smoke cleared away he felt, in his half-dazed condition, as if he were at a theatre watching some strange play. The hut in which he found himself, although the largest in the village, as befitted the station of the Ywa-Thungyi who inhabited it, really consisted of one room, divided into two by a partition of bamboo-mats.

There were no chairs or tables, for the Burmese never use either, nor any other furniture to speak of for the matter of that. Scattered about the floor were a number of mats made of grass, which are used for sitting on by day, either at meals or otherwise, and for sleeping on by night.

In the centre of the floor stood the earthenware *chatti*, containing the charcoal fire used for cooking, and which for the past twelve hours had been kept going for the benefit of the injured man. There is no doubt that the injured man would have awaked to consciousness much sooner without its aid, and with less of a headache, but the good man of the house and his kindly wife were well satisfied with the success of their endeavours, convinced in all probability that without the assistance of its timely heat the patient would never have awaked again.

The farther end of the hut bore a close

resemblance to a jumble sale, being occupied by the inevitable heap of rubbish which accumulates in every well-ordered Burmese household. This collection of odds and ends owes its existence, not to any lack of tidiness on the part of the housewife, but to the innate objection which every Burman holds to part with any disused article however valueless it may be.

Eric had barely time to note all these things before the head-man's wife came forward, and in a solicitous voice said:

“Ma-e-la, Thakin?” In other words, “How are you, sir?”

The Burman always addresses an Englishman by the honoured title of Thakin, just as the Hindu calls him Sahib.

Eric thanked her and said he was better, upon which she smiled and retired, returning in a few minutes with a steaming bowl of curry and rice. There is a yellow pungent mess concocted in the British Isles, and designated by the name of curry, but this is a very different thing from the fragrant dish which this housewife set before her guest. The native curry is a mixture of thirteen freshly gathered herbs, compounded by some mysterious process into one perfect and delicious blend, and those who have once tasted it will never rest satisfied, no matter where their lot may be cast, until they have gone back to smack their lips over it once more.

To the delight of the good woman the Thakin not only ate the fare which she had provided for him, but did so with a keen relish.

Before he had finished it he began to grow sleepy again, and by the time it was all gone was glad to lay down his head with an appreciative “Thank you.” At least he started to say it, but

fell asleep before he got to the end, which seems rather strange until you hear that the Burmese for "Thank you" is "*Kyi-zu-htin-thi*," and that the language is always spoken softly and slowly.

When next he opened his eyes the slanting rays of the setting sun were lighting up the hut, and this time he awoke quietly and without any movement. He felt perfectly rested and at peace, but it was not this which kept him lying there so still, nor the fear of the pain in his side, but the fact that as his eyes opened they were met by a vision of such loveliness as to hold him motionless.

Kneeling in front of him and fanning him there was a girl of about fifteen years of age and of singular beauty. From the shiny gloss of her raven-black hair, the rich colouring in her dusky cheeks, and the luminous depths in her dark eyes to the supple grace of her lithe figure, revealed rather than hidden by her apple-green costume, she was the most perfect specimen of a Burmese girl he had come across; and when you are speaking of female loveliness you cannot say more than that.

"Who are you?" he managed to articulate at last.

"I am Ma-Mi, the daughter of the Ywa-Thungyi," she replied; "but you are not to talk too much, they told me."

"Mah-Mee," he murmured to himself, and thought it a pretty name.

He did not need to talk much, for he was very well content to lie there and gaze at this graceful young creature as she knelt there cooling his heated brow with the movements of her light-plaited fan, or rising to fetch him a drink of cool spring water, freshly drawn from the village well.

Soon the gongs in the monastery rang out the

hour of sunset; the men returned from their work in the fields, the heavy gate of the stockade was closed for the night, and the smell of cooking rose up throughout the village as the lids were taken off the dishes of the *chattis*, and the various households sat down to their evening meal. No appetiser was needed, for these people feed only twice a day, morning and evening. Their menu is of the most limited description, yet they never seem to tire of it. Rice and curry are their staple articles of food, and a flavour is obtained from the *gnapi*, or rotten fish, which they love above all else. Seated on the ground, they eat it with a relish that many a sated worldling in Western life would give worlds to possess.

Eric enjoyed the first two articles of diet, but could never reconcile himself to the fish until he persuaded his hostess to have them freshly cooked. The smell he had to tolerate as best he could, although meal-times always reminded him of fried-fish shops, and very stale ones at that.

Soon after eight o'clock the whole village retired to rest, and silence reigned save for the barking of the pi-dogs and the occasional howl of a jackal in the jungle outside.

For four days life went on in this way, and each morning the invalid woke up feeling stronger, while the pain in his side gradually wore off, which he rightly took to be a sign that his injuries had been mere bruises and shock, with an absence of broken ribs.

His adopted friends had offered to send for a medicine man of great renown from a neighbouring village, but he had wisely preferred to leave himself in the hands of Nature rather than commit himself to the crude surgery of the country.

It was a relief to his stiffened limbs when he

was able to rise up and move about the hut, and his kindly benefactors were as delighted as himself at the accomplishment. Naturally he felt tired after his first effort in this direction, and was thankful to lie down again on his mat.

The village was astir as soon as the sun had risen, and the entire populace adjourned to the river to bathe.

Then the women would start their weaving or other work, or take their place at the little bazaar, whilst the men attended to their own duties, either in the house or in the fields. When the sun was high they would all take their siesta and return to work later on.

On the third day of Eric's confinement to the hut he suddenly remembered the driver of the bullock-wagon who had brought him thus far, as he wished, of course, to reward him for his trouble. To his surprise, but not to that of the people in the house, the man had gone.

"But I never paid him," he said.

"Paid him!" they replied; "why should you pay him?"

There is a world of reflection in that one sentence if you come to think of it in the light of this age of tips. And when he thanked his host for his timely shelter and hospitality it was just the same.

"Reward!" said the head-man; "we want no reward. It was the least we could do for you," and that was the last word he would say on the subject except to add that the Thakin must stay with them until he was quite well and as long after that as he could spare.

As he went to sleep that night he thought with gratitude and affection of these poor heathen, but his last thoughts were not of them but of a saying

from a book that Eric Rankin had seen and thought little of for some time past—"I was a stranger and ye took me in."

During this period his self-constituted nurse, Ma-Mi, tended him like a mother, and if her devotion was in excess of her skill he overlooked the fact. Romi-Somi resented her attentions to his master, whom he regarded as his own property, but consoled himself by making eyes at the village maidens. It is to be hoped for his own sake that his intentions were not serious, for it is to be feared that he stood very little chance of winning their hearts. They were amused by him and treated him kindly, but after all there was no getting over one fact—Romi-Somi was a "nigger," and the Burman always looks down on the native of India as a "black man," good enough in his way, but still—black.

The day came at last when Eric was able to descend the ladder leading from the hut to the ground, for these dwellings are always raised up above the level of the earth as a protection against floods in the rainy season. It was on the fifth morning of his visit that he was able to take a walk round the village, and Ma-Mi went with him.

CHAPTER XXXI

A BURMESE VILLAGE

GREAT was the excitement in the village as Eric stepped down from the head-man's hut, and the inhabitants ceased their work to *shikoh*—the native salute—as he passed among them. An English Thakin is always an object of worship; for although the Burman regards his own country as the highest in the scale of the nations, yet when it comes to dealing with the individual he bows down to the Britisher as his lord and master. And was not this the great Thakin who had slain by fire the death-dealing Kya which for months past had been carrying off their goats, killing men and women, and keeping the whole district in a state of mortal fear.

All the time he had been confined to the hut they had shown no obtrusive curiosity in regard to him. There had been no crowding round his abode or craning of necks to catch sight of this wonderful man they were in reality dying to get a glimpse of, for to appear curious or inquisitive is the worst offence of which these people can be guilty. They were all the more delighted therefore to meet him face to face, offer him their respectful *shikohs*, and make kindly inquiries as to his health.

Of a truth this great Thakin looked a very Triton among the minnows, as he walked in the midst of these people. A tall man in his own

country, by the side of the diminutive Burmans he was a giant.

They admired him and were proud of him too, but none so proud as the little maiden who walked by his side. "You make me feel like a great bear being led round by a rope, Ma-Mi," he said to her, and she smiled up at him, showing her even white teeth, and answered, "No rope would be strong enough to hold you, Thakin." Perhaps not. Or might it be that she was, unconsciously to herself and him, weaving a cord around his heart which might take a good deal of breaking one of these days? Who knows?

To him the scene was one of intense interest. The velvet pile of the green turf which formed the floor—we cannot bring ourselves to call it street—of the village, the quaint huts with their thatch of elephant grass, the waving toddy-palms that fringed the whole enclosure; these were a picture to charm the eye. The old-fashioned well, with its ropes and pulleys, formed a perfect centrepiece, for the well is always the point at which village-life is focused. If anyone, man, woman, or child, wishes for company and talk, there is always this place to make for, and always a good excuse for going there. If water is not wanted at that particular moment, it will be so shortly, for this is a thirsty land, so why not go and draw some—and see your friends at the same time.

But it never looks so pretty as in the evening, for then all the young people meet there, and there will be much laughter and bantering, and the gossip of the day will be discussed in all its details. I fancy I can hear some lady of fashion with distressing memories of afternoon teas, bored faces, and long gaps in the conversation asking of those people who rarely go a mile from home, "What

on earth do they find to talk about? ” Goodness knows; yet there never seems any lack of things to chat about.

The girls will tease the young men, and if they wish to show them a little extra attention, will light their cheroots for them. Perhaps one of them will kiss the cheroot before she hands it to the young swain, and that means business. And some other girl, who has caught her doing so, will tease her about it, and she will promptly deny that she ever did anything of the sort, which is just what a white girl would do under the same circumstances. It may be that as a young man and a maid are talking together someone will tie a piece of ribbon around them, as they do to a couple who are marrying, and there will be more laughing and blushing and disentangling. These are some of the things that will be; there are other things that won't be. There will not be any rudeness, or boisterous talk, or horseplay, for these are foreign to their nature.

As Eric walked among these people day by day he was never at a loss for something to interest him. The live stock alone was sufficient to occupy his attention if only to avoid falling over the dogs, pigs, fowls, and geese which swarmed in all directions. He never could make out why these various animals and birds were kept, for none of them were ever killed, the taking of life being forbidden in the Buddhist creed. He would have liked a chicken or something in the meat line for his meals, but would not strain the consciences of the villagers by asking for one to be slaughtered. It puzzled him as to why these people caught fish, for this involved the taking of life, and he put the question to one of the monks, with whom he was having a chat. The monk explained it by saying that you do not take the life of the fish; you pull it

out of the water and it dies, which Eric thought was a distinction without a difference.

He got his chicken after all, for one day Romi-Somi turned up at the hut carrying a dead fowl. His master was about to scold him for killing it, but the head-man's wife seized the chicken with manifest delight and began to pluck it, ready for boiling. She had been secretly hoping that he would take it into his head to do something of the sort, for Romi-Somi was a nigger and did not count. As for that worthy, he was so pleased with his brilliant idea that he determined to go one better. The following morning there was a sudden commotion, and Romi-Somi was discovered wringing the neck of the largest goose in the village. That was sheer waste of life, however, as there was no one but his master to eat it, and he was ordered to confine his attentions to the chickens in future.

Day after day passed and soon Eric was able to walk with comfort. Yet he gave no sign of going away. It was a pleasant, dreamy existence, this dawdling round the sunny village, something of the life of the lotus-eater which enters into a man's soul and makes him averse to any change. He was a prime favourite, too, in the little community, with a kind word for the boys on their way to and fro to the monastery school, or the little girls at their play, or chatting to the old people at the doors of their huts. With the mothers nothing was too good for the great Thakin who patted their brown, solemn, fat little babies, while the infants who could toddle always ran to him, so that he might lift them up in his arms far above the heads of anyone else.

He would stroll along to the monastery, and the yellow-robed monks would open their hearts freely to this foreigner who never offended them by walk-

ing into their sanctuary with his hat or boots on, or talked in loud tones, as so many of his countrymen are apt to do when they visit these establishments. And as he sat under the teak-wood verandah or beneath the shelter of the spreading trees around it, they would speak to him of the Great Peace to which they were looking forward, and for which they were preparing themselves by their long meditations.

And what of Ma-Mi all this time? Her duties as nurse having become a sinecure, she had taken upon herself the office of guide, and would walk round with him and explain anything that he did not understand, oftentimes with more imagination than accuracy, which made it all much more interesting than if he had obtained his information from the most authentic handbook. He loved to listen to her light-hearted chatter, and her bright, pretty ways reminded him of a butterfly or a bird. He was fond of her as he would have been fond of a little sister, for she was but a child in his eyes, and would sometimes call her by an endearing epithet, at which her face would light up with pleasure, and he would be glad to think that he had gladdened the heart of his young friend and companion.

Unfortunately he had overlooked the fact that a Burmese girl of fifteen is the equivalent of an English one ten years older, for womanhood comes early in tropical lands. He had utterly failed to comprehend the glow of passion which is so ready to flare up in the Oriental nature. The study of the Eastern temperament is well enough when undertaken from a safe distance, but when conducted at too close quarters it is remarkably like playing with fire.

He only meant to be kind to a friendly little girl,

and was blind to the fact that he was gradually placing himself and her in a false position. And his ignorance of many of the customs of the country, in spite of the amount of attention he had devoted to them, helped to hasten on matters still more. One day she lighted his cheroot for him and kissed it before handing it to him, and he little thought that what he regarded as a pretty mark of attention was equal to an avowal of love on her part, otherwise he might have been on his guard. A few days after that too, as they sat by the side of a stream in the course of one of their walks, he made a garland of flowers and placed it on her head, solely with an eye to effect, for he was thinking of drawing a picture of her, and he little thought that, in her eyes, he was reciprocating her affection.

On another occasion, as Ma-Mi was taking her evening meal, Eric dipped his spoon into her bowl of rice, purely in playfulness, and he did not notice the significant glances that passed between the onlookers, nor was he aware that for a man and a girl to eat out of the same bowl is symbolical of marriage.

Of course had he been of her nationality she would not have been content with giving him slight signs, and would have told him exactly what was in her heart, but she had gleaned a good deal of information in the course of their conversation and had found out that in his country girls did not speak of these matters until they were asked. Like most of the Burmese women, she was possessed of a considerable amount of shrewdness.

A Burmese lover, too, would not have halted at mere tokens of affection, but would have taken her in his arms, and have spoken of his love, not in a mere bald statement of the fact, but with all the

poetry with which they invest all their sayings and doings. He would probably have compared her hair to the velvet blackness of the night sky, her eyes to the unruffled surface of a still lake, and her cheeks to the flush that lights the eastern sky at the coming of the day. In whatever way he had expressed himself, he would have had a beautiful simile for everything. There is no love-making in the wide world so æsthetic, so instinct with colour and imagery, as that of this Eastern race. It is idyllic.

Eric did and said none of these things, but that, she argued with herself, was only because he came from a land where they do their courting in a different way. Yet in some ways she liked this English style of love-making, which appealed to her imagination because it left so much unspoken. And all the time this great Thakin was innocently showing a little kindness to a pretty child.

CHAPTER XXXII

THE UNFINISHED LETTER

OF all the walks Eric took, none impressed him more than his first stroll into the jungle after his recovery from his injuries. His ten days of confinement within the enclosure of the palisade, although full of incident, enhanced the pleasure which he felt when at Ma-Mi's suggestion they set off together for a ramble through the forest.

In truth he was glad of her escort, for it is not difficult to get hopelessly lost in the maze of paths, so overgrown with creepers and grass and interlacing branches of the trees as to be invisible to the untrained eye. Sometimes, indeed, he thought that they were really lost, as he found himself surrounded by the dense undergrowth higher than himself and with no apparent chance of retreating even by the way they had come. But the forest-bred girl could always find a way out, and just when Eric felt as if they had come to an absolute impasse, she would push her way through and the next minute they would be standing in some shady dell or at one end of an avenue of bamboos, which reminded him of the nave of a great cathedral.

To him this primeval forest was a colossal work of Nature. Its immensity filled him with wonder and awe, and the network of trees, interwoven with gorgeous colouring of the flowers and creepers, aroused his artistic feelings. Yet he had not learned the mystic secrets, the inner life of the

forest, as it reveals itself to these people, who are born and bred within its precincts, and whose homes are girt about by it on every side. Had Eric been asked, before setting out for that walk, what it was that made the jungle an immense, living, breathing thing, and not a mere collection of trees and plants, he would, like any other stranger, have enumerated insects, snakes and wild animals, and a few dacoits thrown in here and there, and with never a thought of the unseen spirits with which, according to Burmese notions, it swarms from end to end.

This first walk with Ma-Mi soon opened his eyes on the subject. They had come in the course of their stroll to a little dell, carpeted with moss and overhung by a great wide-spreading tree with broad, satiny leaves. Hanging from one of the lower branches was a wicker structure, in the shape of a hut, containing flowers and some boiled rice. "What is this, Ma-Mi?" he said.

She told him that it was a Nat-house, built for the benefit of the great Nat who lived up in the tree. Eric had heard of these Nats already, but wished to hear it over again at first-hand from the lips of this Burmese girl, so asked her to tell him all about them.

"They are the spirits," went on Ma-Mi, "who live in the trees and lurk in the grass. Some of them are kind, but some are very cruel and do you a lot of harm unless you do something to please them. This was a favourite spot for lovers to come to, but two dreadful things happened and they dare not come any longer. One girl came here one day and she disappeared, and a few days later they found her lying dead and mangled under those trees. Then some time after that a pair of lovers were standing just here with their arms

round one another, and a large branch fell off the tree and killed the man. Everybody knew, therefore, that the Nat who lives in the tree was very angry and had killed them, so they built him this house and kept it supplied with flowers and food, and since then no one has been hurt.

That is the substance of what Ma-Mi told Eric, but when she gave the story in her own tongue it sounded like poetry, and she told it so beautifully and with such evident belief in what she was saying, that it sounded very real to him, and made the forest glade seem alive. He did not believe it all, although he did not say so, but in imagination he began to feel as if he were surrounded on every hand by living, watching beings, who listened jealously to all he said, and peered up at him from the grass at his feet, down at him from the trees above his head, and all round him from every side.

It was a weird feeling, easy enough to laugh at from the safe distance of the reader's easy chair at home, but very real to the man who stood there in the depths of the forest with the eeriness of half-light that came from the glinting shafts of sunshine that pierced through here and there.

They walked on again, crossing tiny streams that apparently came from nowhere, and disappeared as mysteriously as they had come, through lofty arched spaces and out once more into the blazing sunshine of some open clearing, until at last Eric remarked that he was thirsty. He dare not drink from the streams, but that was not necessary, for Ma-Mi led the way to a place where by the side of the path there was a bamboo cupboard with jars full of water, and cocoa-nut shells out of which to drink. Everywhere these welcome jars await the thirsty traveller throughout the whole land, and every passer-by is welcome to slake his thirst,

whilst taking care not to waste a drop, for the sake of the next comer.

"This is a kind idea, Ma-Mi," he said. "Who keeps them filled?"

"The people in the nearest village," she answered. "It is an act of merit, Ankin Thakin."

Ma-Mi was very proud of herself when she first learned to pronounce Rankin's name. She called him Ankin, not as a playful diminutive, but because, like every other Burman, she could not pronounce the letter R at the beginning of a name. It is an omission which does not trouble the people, for the simple reason that they are quite oblivious of the fact.

By this time Eric was growing tired, for he had not walked so far since he had met with his injuries, and he suggested that they should return. He began to retrace his steps, therefore, but Ma-Mi pulled his sleeve and took another path.

"That way will take us longer," he said.

"Yes, a little longer," Ma-Mi replied, "but we could not go back the way we came."

"Why not?" Eric said.

The girl looked at him with an astonished stare, as though surprised at his ignorance, and said, "Why, the Nats we disturbed on our way here would be waiting for us as we went back."

Upon which Eric began to think that he had a lot to learn after all.

This walk was the prelude to many others of a like nature, and Eric gradually began to imbibe something of the spirit of these people among whom he was living. Gradually, too, the life commenced to take more and more hold upon him. It was like being in a theatre, watching a play that seemed unreal at first, but which, like many another play, worked on the feelings of the onlooker until

he began to think it true. Other playgoers experience the same sensation, but in his case the scenery was always there and the play never came to an end. More than that, as the weeks went by he unconsciously began to take part in it, and the unreal soon becomes the real to the man who assumes the rôle of an actor.

This, then, was the manner in which the Spirit of the East finally took possession of Eric Rankin's soul, and made him heedless of much that had constituted his life hitherto. It dawned upon him one day that for weeks he had never said his prayers, a custom he had never omitted all through life. He had not given up his religion; he had simply forgotten about it, as he had forgotten many other things.

His past life and all his home surroundings had become as a dream or a hazy recollection of some past existence, and his intercourse with the Burmans, who believe implicitly in previous and future existences on earth, had lent colour to the latter motion.

Even the memory of the girl he had asked to marry him became dimmed in his mind, and her features indistinct, and, unfortunately, her photograph, which would have recalled them, had been left behind in the trunks that were now lying in the left-luggage office at Rangoon. Yet the thought of her brought back to his mind many things that had passed unnoticed in the idle dreaming of the past few weeks. It was nearly a month since he had written to her, and the recollection of this neglected duty came to him with a pang. He would set about it at once, he said to himself, dispatch Romi-Somi to the nearest place whence the letter could be posted, and would then make arrangements to leave this place as soon as possible.

“My dear Marian,”—and that was as far as he had got in the course of half an hour, and try as he might he could not proceed any farther. He was utterly at a loss as to how to account for the gap of a month in his correspondence. The idea of prevaricating never occurred to him. The East had altered his personality, but it had not undermined his sense of honour. Then, too, Marian seemed so utterly out of place in his present surroundings that he could not concentrate his mind on what he wanted to say. It is hard enough under ordinary circumstances to settle down to writing in the sweltering heat of the Tropics; how much more so when there are other and greater difficulties in the way.

He stood up and wiped the perspiration from his face as he stood in the doorway of the hut. The village lay quiet and sleeping in the blazing sunshine, and the heat was intense, for it was now four o'clock in the afternoon, almost the hottest part of the day. The stillness of the afternoon was broken only by the hum of the insects or the soft pad of naked feet, and it lulled his senses and made him more than ever disinclined for the task that awaited him. Once more, however, he faced the all-but-blank sheet of paper, stared at it for a time, then tore it up in despair. The letter was never sent.

As to his plans for departure, it was too hot even to think of them much less to set them forward. He would see about them to-morrow, he said.

A duty postponed is always more difficult to carry out. Eric found it hard enough to-day to make up his mind to leave. To-morrow he would find it more difficult still. The day might come when he would find it impossible.

CHAPTER XXXIII

FIRE

AFTER Eric had given up in despair his attempt to write home, he made up his mind that it was his duty to break away from this life of dreamy inaction and return to his native country at once, and he might have done so had it not been that on that same evening an event took place which caused such excitement in the village as to put it out of his head.

Two hours after he had replaced the notepaper in his bag, the sun went down, and it did so with a glow that caused comment even in that land of fiery sunsets. The western heavens were lighted up as with a mighty conflagration, but what was more extraordinary was the fact that after the sun had dipped out of sight the glow did not disappear, but flared up still more. Then the peace of the little community gave way to pandemonium and despair, for the inhabitants knew that they were confronted with that most terrible of all calamities, a forest fire.

The most awful feature of these fires is the helplessness of the poor villagers living in the secluded parts, from which there is no escape. They cannot run before it, for the fire spreads with a rapidity with which neither man nor beast can compete. Nor are they able to cut a clear ring of space around their village, as is done in the case of prairie fires, for the density of the timber and brushwood renders this a matter of weeks or

months instead of hours or minutes. All they can do is to stand there like dumb animals waiting to be slaughtered.

Mothers clutched their children to their breasts, and other women clung to their husbands or lovers, who were as powerless as themselves to do aught to check the fiery demon that was rushing relentlessly towards them.

The pace of the fire was terrific. The seven months of drought which occurs every year in that country does not strip the trees of their leaves, but it dries up wood and foliage, until what is a spark one moment is a roaring bonfire the next.

Suddenly the terror-stricken people heard a sound that was enough to make their blood curdle. From the direction of the advancing flames there came the sound of unearthly screams, followed by the crashing of falling trees and a pounding thud, as of a great cannon being dragged with incredible speed along the ground. It was a herd of wild elephants, maddened by the sight and smell of the fire, tearing and grinding their way through the matted forest, which would have offered a prolonged resistance to the most modern inventions of man, but gave way before the momentum of these huge beasts, rushing at it in one solid mass.

A quarter of an hour passed and the flames were drawing nearer and nearer. The terror-stricken villagers had only one source of comfort in the midst of their helplessness and despair. In a mute and pathetic trust they had gathered round the great Thakin, who stood, head and shoulders above the tallest of them, cool and collected, with the innate indifference of his race in the face of danger. He was in their eyes a tower of strength, and their only hope in an otherwise desperate condition.

Beside him, convulsively clinging to him, stood

little Ma-Mi. She had instinctively run to him at the first alarm of danger, and his first thought had been of her. He could do no more than anyone else, but his very presence inspired them with a certain amount of confidence.

The fire was now abreast of the village, about half a mile to the north of it, and the fumes and smoke were wellnigh overpowering. At the place where it had first been visible the flames had died down and only a dull glow remained, and in another hour this too was all that was left of it in their vicinity, while the head of the conflagration had moved on towards the east. An hour later this, too, died down, and a huge sigh of relief arose from the watchers, for they knew that the hand of the destroyer had passed them by.

There was little sleep in the village that night. Everyone was too excited to think of lying down, with the exception of the Thakin, who, as soon as he saw that his presence was no longer needed, had returned to the hut and was sleeping the sleep of the just.

"They are a strange people, a great people these Thakins," said the little Burmans.

When the dawn came a meal was prepared, and after it had been taken Eric set off to view the track of the fire. It was a curious sight, and if he had been up in a balloon it would have been more curious still. The fire had spread in a straight line, and it was as though some gigantic plough had drawn an enormous furrow, seventy miles in length, right across the face of the land.

On returning to the village Eric found the inhabitants in groups, discussing the stirring events of the night. This did not astonish him, but what did surprise him very much indeed was to find that their one theme was himself and his

doings. In other words, he discovered that it was his presence, and that alone, which had headed off the devouring monster, and saved the community. When they caught sight of him, they crowded round him and overwhelmed him with their praise and gratitude, and nothing he could say or do would prevent them. He was their hero; nay, more, he was their god.

He had meant to go away for good this morning, but the grateful tributes of the villagers made him loath to leave so abruptly. He would stay a few days longer and then he would definitely bring his visit to an end.

Before the expiration of that period his services were once more called into requisition. A one-year-old baby was taken ill and the distracted mother sent for the Thakin to come and make the child well. In vain he protested that he knew nothing of medicine. He was great, he could do anything, the husband said, and the wife added, "Come and try, Thakin, come and try." And he could not withstand that maternal pleading.

In that climate disease is swift and generally sure, and Eric saw that the child was rapidly sinking from dysentery. He did his best, while telling them that he feared it would be useless; as indeed it was, for within twenty-four hours the little one was gone. And he was once more touched by the gratitude of the parents for services that had been of no avail, as he had been by the thanks he had received for his imaginary succour in the episode of the fire.

That same day the funeral took place, and a strange one it was in Eric's eyes. The whole village dressed itself in its best, and to the accompaniment of music and laughter the tiny corpse, enclosed in its wicker basket, was borne from the

village. The mother was there too, and however sorely her heart might be aching for the little one she had lost, she, too, must appear outwardly as bright as her neighbours.

This levity is due to no callousness, but is simply a part of their creed. It is better for a child to escape the trouble and sorrow of this world, and no one must grieve therefore when it is taken. It is the very creed we teach our own children, but we follow it up with the glaring inconsistency of mourning and lamentation. The procession came to a halt in the jungle, and the basket with the body of the child in it was deposited in its last resting-place, not in the dark ground, but hanging from a tree, to swing in the air and sunshine its little soul had loved. That evening he chanced to pass the hut where the child had lived, and the quietness of the sleeping village was broken by the piteous sobs of a heart-broken young mother.

There is a saying that mishaps always come in threes, and this would seem to be true, for a day or two afterwards the village experienced another sensation. A man rushed up to the head-man's hut and said that his daughter had disappeared. She had been seen to go out through the gate of the palisade on the previous afternoon and had not returned. The inference was that she had met with her death in the forest.

It might be expected that a search-party would be organised at once; but the Burman is not keen on search-parties. If someone has met with disaster they have done so at the hands either of wild beasts or of Nats. In either case, the reasoning is the same. If the wild beast or the Nat was there to harm the victims, it will be there ready for the persons who go to look for them. Therefore, why make matters worse by untimely interference? The

consequence was that the people did what they always do under such circumstances—they talked a lot and that was all.

Five days more passed and Eric was still there. One thing after another had combined to keep him. They were not events of any great importance, or of sufficient interest to warrant our chronicling them. It does not take much to detain a man who finds it hard to go and easy to stay.

On the fifth day he went for a walk in the forest, and that walk was one of considerable import. In the first place, it contained one or two incidents that made a great impression on him. Also it was the last walk that Ma-Mi and he ever took together.

CHAPTER XXXIV

THE LAST WALK

THEY set out in the early morning, for the month of March was well advanced and the heat was growing more intense day by day.

The air was deliciously cool when they started, for it was only seven o'clock, and the long grass was still wet with the heavy dews. Ma-Mi was in high spirits, her rippling laugh was infectious, so that a happier couple could not have been met with in a day's journey.

They were walking side by side along a grass-grown path when she suddenly pulled him back with a look of terror on her face. Eric was amazed, but did not need to ask her why she had turned so quickly and dragged him with her, for as he swerved round he caught a glimpse in the path, at the very spot on which he was about to place his foot, of that speckled green snake that a man steps on but once because its bite means death.

As they traversed another track the girl's heart was beating violently at the thought of what the man had so narrowly escaped. It continued to beat quicker than usual too at the thought that her action in saving him formed another link to bind him to her.

For an hour or more they walked along through shady ways, protected from the heat of the sun, which was now strong enough to be uncomfortable, until at last they came in sight of an old hut, safely ensconced, by the rocks and bamboos which sur-

rounded it, from the depredations of tigers and other beasts of prey. They decided to explore it, for though Ma-Mi had heard of it before as being the disused dwelling of an old woodcutter, who had preferred this solitary life, she had never seen it.

The old man had died there, as lonely as he had lived, but surely his spirit must have returned to its old haunts, for as they entered the dwelling they were met by an unmistakable smell of cooking. Then they stopped dead, for in front of them, kneeling by the cooking *chatti*, was the girl who had disappeared from the village the previous week. She was spending a secluded honeymoon with the young man from a neighbouring village, who had taken her to wife. It is not uncommon for Burmese couples to marry in secret like this, and either to live in their separate homes for a time, keeping their marriage a secret, or else to go off together into the jungle and return home in a week or two.

This custom is the result of the intense modesty of the Burma girls. They will make love to a man, even propose to him, but they loathe the idea of meeting their friends during the early days of their married life. They would shudder at the sight of an English bride walking down the aisle with the eyes of the curious fixed upon her.

The girl was covered with confusion when these two walked in in this unceremonious manner, and more especially as one of the two was the English Thakin, who she thought would scarcely understand the position of affairs. Eric soon set her at her ease, however, and cordially congratulated her and the husband, who came in shortly afterwards. Ma-Mi and he had a second breakfast that morning, and it was a sort of wedding feast, for they strewed the happy pair with flowers and said a

great many pretty things to them and of them. So that Yo-bin, as the girl was called, felt very pleased that they had come, especially as they promised faithfully to keep her secret until such time as she should choose to return and make it known.

The sun was high in the heavens when Eric and Ma-Mi reached home, and he was thankful to lie down in the shade, for the heat was intense by this time. Ma-Mi on the other hand had plenty to occupy her, for to-morrow was one of the greatest feasts of the Buddhist year, the Festival of Water-throwing, when everybody, but women in particular, must look their very best. Hence all the maidens were extremely busy, and very excited also, and probably most of them slept little that night. This was due to no anxiety in regard to the weather. In that country outdoor fêtes are not associated with the anxious forebodings on that score that we experience here. Consequently we need not adopt the usual phrase that "the morning dawned bright and clear," as the remark would be superfluous seeing that for two hundred days in succession the dawn had been in this wise.

The festival began, like all their great feasts, in the morning, and lasted until long after their usual bedtime. The cotton everyday clothes had been replaced by costumes of silk, the handmade silk which is as soft to the eye as to the touch, and many of them presented costly embroideries, strangely out of proportion to the status of the wearers until we remember that the Burmans carry the great part of their savings on their backs, for they have nothing else on which to spend their money.

The girls were decked out with garlands of flowers, which, with the *temaines* of every shade and hue, made the whole village a blaze of light

and colour. The atmosphere seemed to be made up of laughter and singing, and the merriment was great as a maiden, with an expression of perfect innocence, would suddenly empty a bowl of water over some unsuspecting youth. For this was the custom of the fair at this festival, which is held at the end of the dry season as a happy augury of the much-needed rain which was due in a few weeks.

In the afternoon they were forced to rest during the intense heat, but towards sunset the proceedings started with renewed vigour, and a picturesque element was added in the shape of illuminations, the huts and trees being hung with coloured lanterns or any other devices which occurred to the inhabitants. After dark a general move was made to the river, and a number of little toy boats and rafts were launched, bearing tiny-coloured fires, which made a charming picture as they floated down the stream.

Meanwhile the young people were strolling off in twos and threes—more twos than threes—and many a lover and his lass, too shy to be seen walking away together, would meet in trysting-places among the glades, for the forest was safe from the danger of wild beasts on this night when the illuminations scared them from their haunts in the vicinity.

Eric had entered with zest into the play, although the girls had not dared at first to be so presumptuous as to throw water at the Thakin until Ma-Mi set the example, after which he had a thoroughly good time of it. As he stood by her side, watching the lights on the river, and almost all the other girls had strolled off with their sweethearts, or to meet them, he said to Ma-Mi: "Where is your lover, Ma-Mi? Why do the young men leave you alone?"

The girl smiled up in his face and naïvely remarked, "One lover is enough for me"; and her eyes glowed with pride as she added, "And such a lover too! As for the young men," she continued, "none of them would think of asking me, for it is considered very wrong to court a girl who is betrothed already."

Eric was both puzzled and astonished by her words. He had often wondered how it was that the belle of the village had received so little attention from the youths, but had supposed it was because she was so young. Though when he came to think of it there were others of her neighbours of the same age who had suitors, and some who were actually married. Now when he heard her speak of her betrothal, as if she expected him to know all about it, he could not understand why he had not been told of it by the rest of the family. Hence he naturally put his wonderment into words.

"I never heard that you were betrothed, Ma-Mi," he said. "Who is the young man? I suppose he must come from some other vilage?"

For a moment or two the girl was bewildered. Then suddenly a hideous thought came to her mind, the idea that during these past weeks, which had been like a delicious dream to her, and during which she had been the envy of every other girl in the village, she had been played with by this good-looking and charming Thakin. It is the one thing a maiden resents more than any other; it is the one thing she cannot forgive.

She said nothing, but into her eyes there came a look which pierced the soul of the man beside her, and which let a flood of light into his mind. In that one moment he saw and understood. For in that flash, that came and went as soon as it had come, a host of feelings expressed themselves—wounded

pride, resentment, and a touch of contempt. Even in the shock that passed through him a picture rose in his mind of a scene he had witnessed years before.

When a boy in his teens he was sitting one day by the side of a still, silent pool, when out of the dark depths something gleamed, and he saw the eyes of a fish. They just touched the surface of the water, scarcely enough to ruffle it, and then were gone. Yet to his childish imagination they brought a sense of foreboding, a feeling of awful possibilities lying deep down among the still waters, and an eerie sensation that made him thankful to turn his back upon the pool and seek the open sunshine again.

In an astonished, apologetic voice he said, "But, Ma-Mi, I never thought of such a thing. I looked upon you as a child and treated you as such. I never meant to be anything but kind to you."

"But you let me kiss your cheroot, and you put the garlands on my head, and you ate out of the same bowl with me," she replied; and added with a tone of bitterness, "You did it of your own accord too; I did not ask you."

He offered her his sincere regret and did not attempt to defend himself. He explained as well as he could how it had all come about, and he finished up by saying, "Besides, I am engaged to be married to a young lady at home."

At that she turned on him with flashing eyes and said, "Then you had no right to pay attentions to any other girl," and with that she walked away rapidly and left him standing alone by the river.

As he stood by the stream that an hour before had been a blaze of light and colour, the last of the little illuminations went out and the darkness closed in around him.

CHAPTER XXXV

THE PESTILENCE THAT WALKETH IN DARKNESS

FOR two full hours Eric stood by the river trying to face this impossible situation. He reproached himself bitterly for his foolishness and indiscretion. More than this he knew it had never been. He had never thought of such a thing as marriage, or that the girl had thought of it either, and certainly no thought of evil towards her had ever crossed his mind. He had simply been indulgent and brotherly towards a child, until that sudden look in her eyes had shown him that unwittingly he had been tampering with a woman's heart.

As he stood there in the silent night he had no thought of danger in the shape of wild beasts. To loiter or even to walk in the jungle by night is to court death, but this never occurred to his mind. Had it done so he would in all probability have paid no heed; his life had come to such an impasse that a sudden termination would have been an easy way out of it.

At last, long after all the lights had gone out in the village and slumber had fallen on the community, he slowly made his way back. He shook the locked gate of the palisade and woke up the watchman, who was amazed to find that anyone was out at such an hour. When he saw that it was the Thakin he respectfully *shikohed* and remarked that he was glad he had escaped from danger; and indeed it was a miracle that he had

thus escaped, and probably he had only done so because the illuminations had frightened the beasts to a safe distance. There is more than animal life to be taken into consideration, however. There is a pestilence that walketh in darkness, and the man who is rash enough to stand out by a stream in the tropical jungle during the hours of darkness rarely escapes with impunity.

It was past midnight when he climbed the ladder of the hut and lay down on his mat. His mind was too full of the events of the evening, and of the unexpected climax to which his wanderings had led him for any chance of sleep to come to him. The night was intolerably hot, too, so much so that even the natives, accustomed as they were to it, seemed restless. The hours dragged on, and out of the chaos of his reflections there was one thing, and one only, that lay clear before him—he must leave this place and leave it first thing at daybreak. There must be no excuses this time; no feeling of abruptness towards the people who had shown him so much kindness, and whose hospitality he had so unknowingly abused.

The night grew hotter, as it does sometimes in the season preceding the rains, and his head began to ache. He got up and leaned over the framework of the hut trying to get a breath of air, but the very atmosphere itself seemed stagnant; then he had to lie down again, for a terrible nausea took possession of him. Not long after that he thought that it must be getting cooler, for he gave a shiver; then he grew hot again, and felt stifled, and after that he shivered again more violently than before. In a few minutes his teeth were chattering, his limbs shaking convulsively and aching as if he were on the rack. The wild beasts

had not touched him as he lingered by the river-side, but the pestilence, the deadly malaria of the country, held him in its clutches.

The son of the house, who had been awaked, bent over him, and seeing what was the matter roused his parents. A fire was kindled in the *chatti*, hot drinks prepared, and rugs piled on the top of the shaking man; but he grew colder and colder until he felt as if the marrow of his bones had become ice.

Gradually the shaking ceased and a dry heat, like the burning of a furnace, stole over him. Then the perspiration started, and soon he was sweating from every pore, until his clothes and the mat on which he was lying were one soaked mass. An hour of this and then came the paralyzing tiredness that follows a malarial attack; a languor so great that all a man wants is to be allowed to die, or failing that to lie down and sleep. And that was just what he did after they had put dry clothes on him, and he slept like a log until the afternoon.

Fortunately, he had a good supply of quinine in his bag, and knew how to take it, and though it mitigated the attacks it could not stop them all at once, and every night for a week he went through the same symptoms, though with less intensity each time, until at last they ceased altogether. Then came the period of languor; the lassitude that keeps a strong man pinned to his bed, not caring whether he lives or dies.

During all this time Ma-Mi had been his devoted nurse once more. "With an ultimate object in view, the sly puss," I hear one of my readers remark. It was not so, however. What the Burmese girl did for him during these long, weary days she did out of pure kindness of heart.

She might, perhaps, have tried to win him to her side had it not been for what he had told her as to the girl he was going to marry. It says much for our country, so much abused even among ourselves, that the natives always implicitly recognise an Englishman's word as his bond.

In the light of this remark it is necessary for us to be merciful of Eric Rankin in our judgment of him for all that had happened during the past few months, and for all that passed through his mind during the next couple of days.

Of a temperament which his upbringing had repressed and in so doing had accentuated, dragged by fate, as it seemed, away from all that he had previously held dear, and placed in circumstances which had almost effaced the memory of his previous existence, it is not surprising that the prospect of facing the old life again presented itself in the light almost of an impossibility. Add to this the effects of a severe attack of malaria, aggravated by a diet and mode of life to which his constitution had never been accustomed, and it is evident that the standard by which we judge him must be a merciful one.

His very honesty stood in his way. A less conscientious man might have gone back to his fiancée with a concocted story to account for his neglect of her, but that was not the way of a Rankin, and we have said already that perfect honesty and straightforwardness was the one characteristic which he shared with his forefathers. As he lay in that hut, weak and tired to a degree that was positively painful, his thoughts of Marian were of one whom by his own foolishness he had lost for ever.

When a man has lost a white lily that he has prized, who shall blame him if, seeing a beautiful

crimson rose in front of him, he should feel tempted to pluck it? Two days after the attacks of fever had left him, Eric lay still one afternoon doing his best to think out what was to be done. It was hard work, however, for his head was throbbing as with the sound of rushing water. The enormous doses of quinine which he had had to take were working their aftermath upon him, and rendered consecutive thought impossible.

Two facts alone stood out with wearying pertinacity: he was unworthy of the girl he loved, and his attempts to make the best of his life in the past had been an unmitigated failure.

The more he tried to think the louder grew the roaring in his head, and the weaker he became; he felt like a man drifting down a stream which was getting swifter and more irresistible every minute. The roar of the rapids grew nearer and nearer. Why continue this useless struggling any longer? Why not give up everything and settle down in this peaceful, quiet haven?

It was just then that opening his eyes he saw the graceful figure and the lovely face of the girl who had nursed him through two illnesses with such devotion, and had saved his life in the jungle. She was kneeling by his side, fanning him as she had done once before when he first came to this little village. A wave of gratitude swept over him for all she had done for him; for all the love she had so innocently given him when he, as innocently, had misled her as to his intentions. More than all, perhaps, he admired her for the way in which she had never reproached him since they had parted on that fateful night beside the river. It was a pity those flowers he had taken

from Marian on the day of their parting were lying in a left-luggage office a hundred miles away; they might have come in very useful just now.

How could he leave her, and how was he to face the future that in his weakness and emaciation he shrank from with a shudder? A feeling of terrible languor overcame him, and he felt too tired to think. Why not stay among these kindly people instead of going back to the hurrying, bustling West? Why not take to himself this beautiful girl, in whom all the charm and wonder of the East seemed to be concentrated? He would marry her, nothing less, he told himself, and give her his name honestly in the sight of God and man. The roaring in his ears grew louder and louder; the rapids must be close at hand. He moved his arms to pull her shapely little head on to his shoulder; when a hearty voice from the doorway of the hut exclaimed, "Well, old chap, I've found you at last. How are you getting on?"

It was old Dick Marshall, who had heard of his disappearance, and had set off, regardless of his own time or comfort, to look for him.

"Oh, I beg pardon," he added, as he caught sight of Ma-Mi kneeling there, and he offered her his respectful salutations, which she gravely returned as she rose to her feet and went out, leaving the two men alone.

There was no awkward pause, because Marshall took good care that there should not be one. He could see that there was something wrong somewhere, so treated the whole affair in a matter-of-fact way.

"Well, how have you been getting on?" he said. "We missed you and could not make out what had become of you. Upon my word, you're

looking pretty rocky just now. Have you had fever?"

"Fever, yes, and made a blessed ass of myself at the same time; I'll tell you all about it," and Eric proceeded to give him a faithful account of all that had happened since he left Mandalay. He did not spare himself, in fact he appeared so anxious to load himself with all the blame he could put upon his own shoulders that Marshall interrupted him.

"Never mind about moralising, old fellow," he said; "just stick to facts if you really want to throw it off your chest." Dick saw that Rankin was weak and overwrought, and, like many other people in similar circumstances, inclined to make himself out as black as he possibly could.

Eric therefore went on with his story, simply stating the plain facts without any comment, until he reached the stage where Ma-Mi and he stood together by the river, and his eyes were opened to the true state of affairs.

Then his feelings broke out once more, and he concluded with a vote of self-censure, "I've been a cad."

Marshall, who had seated himself on Eric's kit-bag for want of anything else to sit on, deliberately lighted a cheroot, and then, gazing at his friend with that air of tolerant wisdom which was characteristic of one who knew and could therefore understand, uttered the judicial observation, "No, you are not a cad; you have been the victim of circumstances."

Then he suddenly fixed his gaze on the man lying on the mat before him, and said with emphasis, "There are precious few fellows who would have come out of it with as clean hands as

you have done; so buck up and make the best of things, and don't be a hypochondriacal idiot."

It was quite a long sentence for Dick Marshall, and he had to take at least a dozen vigorous whiffs at his smoke before he could recover himself.

"As for your having lost Miss Barclay," he afterwards added, "that's all rot. You've done nothing wrong, only been a bit imprudent, which is a very different matter."

"Yes, that's all right," said Eric; "but how am I to explain my neglect of her? I've actually never written her for six weeks!"

"Just so"; and Dick began to attempt a little sarcasm, at which he was too honest to be an adept; "and your duty is, of course, to see her as soon as you get home, tell her everything and a lot more besides, paint yourself as black as you can, call yourself all the evil names you can think of, break her heart and spoil her life and your own as well. Here, have a cheroot. So endeth the words of Richard Marshall, guide, philosopher, and blitherer in general; I've never talked so much at a sitting before, and I'm as dry as a cork."

Then he lifted Eric up and led him out to the fresh air, and showed him his little dogcart, the *tum-tum* as it is called, and the little Burmese pony, of which he was justly proud. Then, as Eric was looking fagged, he took him back to the hut and made him lie down, whilst he occupied his time in collecting the invalid's belongings and packing the kit-bag. He hummed quietly to himself, only looking up once to remark, in reply to Eric's questioning stare, "We're going for a drive to-morrow, you know." With that he went out to see that his pony was being attended to, and Eric, left alone, lay back exhausted with the emotions of the past hour. By the time Dick

returned, a quarter of an hour later, he was fast asleep, and it was broad daylight next morning before he opened his eyes again.

The first thing he heard on awaking was Dick's lively whistle, which was interrupted by the sound of the patient stretching himself.

"Hullo, you are looking a new man; that sleep has put some life into you. Lie still until I go to look for my boy."

But Eric could not lie still. Health was coursing in his blood once more, and he wanted to bestir himself. He rose from his mat, and though he tottered a bit at first was soon able to walk without feeling as though the world was swimming round.

A change had passed over him and through him; a strange wave of feeling that he could not define. The fresh, cheery voice of Dick Marshall had been to him like a welcome breeze of evening that stirs the leaves which have been drooping all day in the sultry heat, and had called into activity Western instincts and Western energy that had lain dormant all through these weeks of idle dreaming. The spell of the East was broken.

Old recollections came back to him; his home and all that it meant rose clear and distinct before his eyes. Then, like a flash, the face of his promised wife stood out in his vision in all its sweetness and purity. A fierce longing to be beside her once more, to speak to her, and take her in his arms, swept through his whole being. It was not that, however, which accounted for the flush that came into his cheeks. What made the blood rise to his face was his anger towards himself as he thought of the way in which he had treated her. He called himself a fool and a variety of other epithets too numerous to mention.

Then his anger gave place to a bitter pang that rent his heart as he reflected that by his own insane actions he had probably estranged her affection.

What had happened? was the thought that passed through his mind. He took out a piece of paper and feverishly began to put down certain dates, and to make certain calculations, and the result stared him in the face with undeniable mathematical accuracy. A cable would not save the situation. He had not written to her for two whole months, and that meant that for weeks past she had had neither letter from him nor any knowledge of his whereabouts.

There was one who had not failed to take advantage of this fact, he felt certain. As he stood there, cursing himself for a fool once more, it was not the sweet face of his love that he saw, but an evil smile of triumph on the sardonic countenance of Maurice Lerman.

CHAPTER XXXVI

THE SILENCE BROKEN

THE last trace of the morning mists had vanished into the blue ether, and the golden sunshine flooded the village as Eric stopped to take his last look at the place which, for these eventful weeks—years as they seemed to him—had been his home. The scene photographed itself with remarkable accuracy upon his mind: the green sward, the old well, the quaint huts and the waving palm trees, and beyond that the glorious tangle of the forest. But what lingered longest in his memory was the sight of the crowd of villagers gathered to bid farewell to the Thakin they simply worshipped. The kindly, simple hearts, how good they had been to him, he thought. Would that he could have done something to repay them; but he could not, because there was nothing they wanted, except that he should stay with them a little longer.

Before he left he spoke to the head-man, and freely expressed his regret for any pain he had caused his daughter. The reply wounded him by its very courteousness. "The Thakin did it unwittingly. He did not understand the customs of our country." Then he bade him good-bye, and Eric looked around for Ma-Mi, but she had disappeared. Since that fateful evening she had uttered no word of reproach, had never even referred to the matter, but she would not trust herself to undergo the leave-taking.

Eric had come there with the object of getting

to know something of the heart of this noble people, and how well he had succeeded is evident from the fact that he did not make the unpardonable mistake of offering them money when he went away.

The jungle grass was waving in the breeze which the sun had not yet killed, and the two men sitting in the dogcart with their respective boys hanging on behind felt their spirits rising as they drove through the shady glades or along the grass-grown paths. In a sheltered nook in the forest a Burmese girl was sobbing as she thought of the man she would never see again.

Two days later Marshall and Eric sat in the private room of the hotel in Rangoon. They had told no one of their arrival, for Eric had no desire to face the curious questions which were sure to be asked as to his doings of the past few months. A steamer was leaving for home a few days later, and, as Dick put it, the best thing was to lie low. He went out and engaged a berth for Eric, and reclaimed his luggage from the railway authorities.

The mail was due to leave on the following day and was timed to reach England ten days before the steamer, having the advantage of going overland part of the way. Marshall returned to the hotel after executing various commissions, and found Eric with a sheet of notepaper in front of him.

"Hullo, writing?" he said.

"No, trying to," was the disconsolate reply. "I don't know where to begin or what to say. Confoundedly perplexing you know; there's an awkward gap that takes a lot of filling up."

"That's all right; don't you worry. I'm just going out to send a cable to your people to say I found you laid by with fever, too weak and ill to do anything."

"But——" Eric started to say.

"Oh, yes! I know all about that; not strictly correct and so forth, you weren't ill all those weeks, etc., etc. Look here, when you get out of my clutches you can do what you jolly well like, and a fine mess you'll make of it, I expect. But while you are here, I'm going to run the show. It's one thing to be strictly accurate, and it's another to see the only thing to be done and to do it. And if the latter will save your people from puzzling over a heap of things they could not possibly understand, and avoid an uncomfortable feeling all round, I say it's the right thing to do."

Poor Dick fell into a chair with a sigh of exhaustion. "You take more talking to than any other man I ever met," he concluded by saying. Eric could not help laughing. Old Dick did him a world of good, far more than all the sages and philosophers in existence could have done for him.

"By-the-bye," Dick said, as he was starting for the post office, "I inquired at the agents this morning about your letters from home, and it appears that the duffers kept them until last week, and then posted them back in a bunch, as they did not know your whereabouts."

"Then they are a set of unmitigated asses," Eric replied. But, had he known it, they had done him a good turn, for among those letters was the one which Marian had written after she had read the communication from Miss Watson to Lerman, and which she so bitterly repented having sent. And that was how she got it back after all, and Eric never received it.

Then Dick went out and sent the cable. Rapid as the telegraph is, thought is quicker still, and we may therefore in imagination await its arrival in Glasgow.

It was a morning in early April, and the wild March winds had fled, giving place to a balmy air that was very acceptable after the long, dreary winter. Yet as Mr Rankin walked to his office he took no notice of the improvement in the weather, for his mind was occupied, as for weeks past, with the anxiety, on his son's behalf, that gnawed night and day at his heart. He began to open the letters, taking the telegrams first, as was his habit. The first one a contract in Buenos Ayres. The second a matter of business in Port Said. This one needed immediate attention, so he dictated an answer to the clerk who was waiting on him. All mere routine, so that he did not hurry. Then he opened a third: "Eric been ill in jungle; better now, returning by next steamer, leaving Friday."

The paper fluttered from his hand, and the clerk hurried to his side, for he thought Mr Rankin was going to faint. "Have you had bad news, sir?" he said in a kindly tone.

"No, oh no. It is from . . . about my son. He is . . . safe." And he buried his face in his hands.

He was quite self-possessed half an hour later, however, when he walked into Mr Barclay's office to acquaint him with the news. He would go straight to Marian to tell her, he said, and was hurt when Mr Barclay insisted on telling her himself, but seeing that he was dealing with her father Mr Rankin had to give way and content himself with sending a wire to his two girls in Bournemouth.

After he had gone Mr Barclay called Lerman into his room and told him the news. "I am going to tell Marian myself when I go home to lunch. Meanwhile I wish you to go to my house, as I have left my glasses there." He must have been

in the habit of carrying two pairs about with him, for the ones he was wearing seemed to suit him quite well. "You can tell Marian that they are in the library, and you can say anything else that occurs to you at the same time."

It was an enigmatic sentence, but from the look which passed between them its meaning was not lost on the younger man.

Lerman arrived at the house and inquired for Miss Barclay. He gave her the message, and received the glasses, but did not seem to be in any hurry to go. Mrs Barclay was not down yet, as he well knew, for she was not in the habit of getting up for breakfast.

"You are not looking well," he said to Marian. "We shall have to send you off to Bournemouth again, I am afraid. Of course I know you have had a deal of anxiety, but really is it worth while troubling about that man any more, after the way he has treated you?"

It was the first time he had dared to utter any direct reproach against Eric, and Marian looked at him in surprise. The annoyance she felt at his presumption raised a flush in her cheeks, but he paid no heed to it, and calmly went on: "You will get over it in time, as so many girls have done before you, especially with their first love-affairs, which are nearly always a mistake. And like them you will live to congratulate yourself on having had a lucky escape.

"Of course," he continued, "I know that you have often resented my attitude towards Rankin, but if you knew all you would hardly wonder that I have not gushed over him. You remember the time when I was ill after my experience with the hooligans on my way home one night last autumn. Well, I never told you before, but there

were never any hooligans in the matter. What happened was that Rankin in speaking of you one night at the Club used a most objectionable epithet, and I was boiling over with indignation. I could not make a row there, for it is not allowed, and, besides, I knew that you would not wish your name to be bandied about before people. So I waited for him when he came out, and challenged him with it. He only smiled, which angered me all the more, and then without the slightest warning he struck me a violent blow between the eyes that nearly stunned me, and when he had me defenceless in this way he knocked me about until he nearly killed me. I invented the story of hooligans solely in order to spare your feelings, for, of course, you were engaged to him at the time."

It was a clever version of the episode in question, but the cleverest bit of it all was that word *were*. It coolly took for granted that she did not consider herself as engaged to him now. It was Eric's "taking for granted" that had estranged him from Marian, and Lerman adopted the very same means to secure for himself what his rival had lost.

Those all-compelling eyes of his were fixed on hers now with a steady, never-varying look. They had upset more experienced women than Marian Barclay ere this. And Lerman was dangerously at his best just now, if best it can be called. He was telling lies, and was, therefore, in his element. He was a superb actor, too, and lived his part, and as he gazed at her with such tenderness in his eyes he even began to feel something of what he was personating, and this in its turn added a touch of fervour to his words and looks.

Eric was very far away, in more senses than one, and in her heart Marian had given up all hope of seeing him again, at any rate as a lover. The

strain of the last few months, the striving and struggling against the designs of her father and of this man who stood looking into her eyes, and the constant hoping against hope, had all told upon her, in mind as well as in body. She felt now as though her very will had been taken out of her keeping, as if a swift fate was bearing her to her destiny.

Lerman read the signs. Love he did not detect, but of that he cared little. All he wanted at this juncture was her promise. Taking advantage of this critical moment, he seized her hands. "Marian, I have loved you from the first." And he flung himself into his part with such intensity that he actually believed his own words. "I cannot live without you. Marian, my dearest, my own love, say you will be my wife."

The girl stared at him as though she were hypnotised, but the answer was not given. At that moment the door opened and Mrs Barclay entered the room.

CHAPTER XXXVII

THE LAST LOOK

THE sun was setting over the Bitter Lakes as the *Tennasserin* steamed towards Ismailia, where the last stage of the homeward journey through the Suez Canal begins. A tall, dark man, sunburnt to almost blackness, stood on the deck watching the scene.

Six months before, this same man, Eric Rankin, had leant on the rail of the *Martaban*, revelling in his first view of the desert. At that time his cheeks were well rounded, and his vivacious eyes had a youthful look of keen curiosity. Now the cheeks were hollow, as of one who had been through illness and perhaps trouble as well, and he had aged more than the passage of only half a year would seem to warrant. His gaze was the quiet, steadfast look of a man who had mapped out his course in life and meant to adhere to it, cost him what it might.

Those who saw him at this time and remembered what he had been six months before said that he was not so good-looking and yet in many ways had changed for the better. The metal had been beaten in the fire and had left some of its dross behind.

Next morning the steamer was ploughing her way through the Mediterranean, and for that man the Golden East had passed into the land of dreams and bygone memories.

He had scarcely yet recovered from the effects of his attack of fever, but the westerly breeze was wonderfully invigorating. He was walking back and fore along the deck when a voice exclaimed, "Lovely morning, is it not?"

Eric turned and saw a stout man of middle age, who might have been a German or a Russian, he could not tell which, and the accent with which the foreigner spoke his otherwise perfect English did not enlighten him on the point.

They strolled about together, talking of various things, and then exchanged cards, and the name which Eric saw on the one he received made him puzzle his brains. "Gustav Plowitz." Where had he heard that name before.

"Where are you bound for, may I ask?" he said. When Mr Plowitz replied that he was going to Glasgow, Eric inquired if he had been there before.

"Only once," Plowitz replied. "I was there for a few days last year." And at that, something that Marian had told him flashed across Eric's memory.

"Did you dine with some people called Barclay, by any chance?" he said.

"I did," Plowitz answered, "and found Mrs Barclay and her daughter most charming. Mr Barclay I did not—but perhaps he is a friend of yours?" he said.

"Well, not particularly so," Eric answered, "although I should not say so, as I am—was engaged to his daughter."

"Ach, is that so? Most extraordinary coincidence that we should happen to speak of them. It was indiscreet of me, most indiscreet, to hint that I was not prepossessed in his favour."

"Don't worry about that," Eric said, "He

has been bitterly opposed to my engagement all through."

"And why?" Plowitz said with amazement. And to look at the fine, well-built specimen of manhood standing before him was enough to make Mr Plowitz's eyes dilate with surprise. "Perhaps," he added, "there is someone else he favours in your stead." Then, as though the one thought had led to another, he said, "Do you know a man called Lerman who is in Mr Barclay's office?"

"Yes, I know him"; and the dark look which accompanied the words did not escape Plowitz's observation.

"It was on his account," the foreigner said, "that I was invited to dine with them. Mr Barclay wished me to meet him as we both came from the same town in Germany. Mr Lerman did not turn up, however, rather to my disappointment, as I was anxious to make his acquaintance."

Eric's curiosity was aroused, and both then and afterwards he asked Plowitz many questions, and Plowitz did the same, with this difference, that while the latter obtained enlightening replies to his queries, Eric never got an inch further. Plowitz was a diplomatist, and had the priceless faculty of answering without vouchsafing any information whatsoever, and his air of bland innocence at last lulled Eric's suspicions that Plowitz knew more about Lerman than he was disposed to admit.

Apart from this one friendship, Eric made few acquaintances on board. He was not in the mood for ship's games or ship's tattle, for he had sufficient to occupy his attention in other directions. His thoughts were ever forwards, not backwards. If the East entered his mind, it was

as a play he had witnessed, or it would be more correct to say had taken a part in. His whole time was taken up in speculating as to what would happen when he reached home, and chiefly as to the reception he would receive at the hands of the girl he had treated so badly.

The days passed quickly, and at last the shores of England were in sight. It was a glorious afternoon in the month of May, and the Atlantic breezes filled Eric Rankin with a life and energy he had not known for many a long day, and inspired him, in spite of his forebodings, with a sense of hope and confidence. Even the white-topped waves of this summer sea seemed to feel the brightness of the day, as they danced and sparkled in the sunshine.

The land gradually stood out more clearly in all its sweet freshness, and picture after picture of green meadows, blue hills, and snug little villages with their church spires glided past.

The man who gazed on these scenes with hungry eyes felt ashamed to think that he had ever likened this fair land to a barren desert. As he stood there by the ship's side, his native country appeared to him in a vastly different light from that in which he had, not so very long ago either, regarded it.

He thought of the position she had won for herself, by long centuries of hard-fought struggle, among the nations of the world; of all she had done towards progress and enlightenment; of her manifold institutions for the relief of sickness and suffering of every sort and kind; and the maturity of the East, as he had himself termed it, seemed to him now as the lethargy of stagnation.

When he reflected further that all these many charities had as their mainspring the Christian

religion, he was amazed to think that his belief in this should ever have been suspended by the enervating fatalism of the East.

The sight of his native land and the life-giving breezes, blowing from off the sea that girt her round, were completing what Dick Marshall's genial presence had begun, and were restoring Eric Rankin's soul to Western standards and Western ideals.

It was nearly dark by the time they came into the Mersey, but that did not prevent Eric from catching the night express, which would enable him to reach home by breakfast-time. He was too late to send a wire, and did not regret the fact, as he wished to give his people a surprise, for they thought he was coming on by the steamer the following day. Plowitz also did not want to waste a day, so they travelled up together.

As the night wore on, and the landscape became dimly visible in the grey light of a chilly dawn, Eric's spirits sank, and it was with an anxious sense of misgiving that he thought of the ordeal that lay before him at his journey's end. Every mile of the way it became more difficult—this problem as to how he was to explain his conduct, his strange disappearance, and the silence that followed it. Now he would wish that the train would go faster that he might get it over. Then he would have had it slow down in order that he might still live on in hope a little longer before he found out the bitter truth. For it was not only the ordeal through which he had to pass that was disquieting him, but the face of Maurice Lerman that loomed larger and ever larger in his mind's eye.

At last he could not bear the thought of that face any longer, and he unburdened himself to Plowitz,

who had already received his confidence on the subject.

"That man's image has come between us ever and again from the first," he said in a dejected tone, "and though I would not wish to utter one word of doubt against that dear girl, I cannot help having a terrible presentiment that he has come between us once more, and come to stay this time. He has had his chance, and is not the man to have failed to make the utmost use of it. And it was I who gave him that chance," he added bitterly and sorrowfully.

"Ah, well, my friend, we must hope for the best," Plowitz said. "And remember that I shall be in Glasgow for a week, and if I can be of any service to you be sure that I shall be only too pleased to render it."

"A singular offer," thought Eric, but one which proved very useful before the day came to an end. Then he gave himself up once more to debating within himself what he should say in regard to his flight into the jungle and all that happened there.

He little thought that that part of the business was the least difficult phase of the problem he was soon to face.

CHAPTER XXXVIII

HOME

THE reader no doubt feels entitled to a pathetic description of Eric Rankin's home-coming, with touching references to hearts that had been well-nigh broken, and apt allusions to the return of the prodigal son. As a matter of prosaic fact, his arrival at the house was ever afterwards associated in his mind with bacon and eggs, not in their proper place in a breakfast-dish but in a horrible mess on the floor.

On reaching the house at the end of his railway journey he had found the front-door open, so had walked in without ringing. The breakfast-table was laid, and in a few minutes later Mr Rankin, with his customary punctuality, and the first to come down as usual, was descending the stairs. At the same moment the maid crossed the hall, carrying a tray with a couple of dishes, and entered the dining-room. The next thing Mr Rankin heard was a shriek of "Oh lawks!" and the crash of falling crockery. As he hurried into the room to see what on earth was the matter, he had a jumbled vision of a petrified maid-servant, a medley of eggs and bacon on the carpet, and beyond that his son, gaunt and sunburnt, walking towards him with outstretched hand. And on the face of his son he saw a look of tender affection that he had hungered for ever since that son was a little boy.

As they stood there gripping one another by the

hand it seemed as if the gap of years had been bridged over, as if all their old misunderstandings and antagonisms had died out, as if their widely separated paths had converged at last. They could neither of them speak. There are moments too deep for words.

Then a wild rush was heard on the stairs as Elsie and Janet flew down, excited beyond measure at seeing their brother again. They sat down to breakfast, as soon as a fresh supply of eatables had been cooked and the debris of their unfortunate predecessors removed, and a happier meal was never known. There was much to talk about, and no awkward questions were asked.

Breakfast over, Eric accompanied his father into the library. He felt that he owed it to him to give an account of his doings, though how to make him understand the why and the wherefore was beyond his comprehension.

"Well, my boy, it's a treat to have you back," Mr Rankin said. "You have had a good trip, I hope. It was unfortunate about your illness. How long did it last and what was it?"

"It was malarial fever," Eric replied, "and I had it for some weeks."

"But you must have been ill for a good time altogether," his father went on to say—"six or seven weeks, was it not, before you were able to write; I cabled to Bridson to get news of you, but he did not know where you were."

It was all said in a kind, solicitous voice, not with any intention of seeming to doubt his son's word, and it was that fact which touched Eric, and he could not bear the idea that he was, however indirectly, deceiving his father. He walked over to the door and carefully closed it. Then coming back to where his father was sitting, he told him the

whole story from beginning to end, plainly, simply, and straightforwardly. If anything were needed to cement their new-found sympathy, this mark of confidence on Eric's part did it.

"It was a pity," Mr Rankin said, when the story came to an end, "but you were placed in an awkward position, and it's no use worrying over it now." Then he added in a lower tone of voice, "I once nearly lost the best and sweetest woman who ever lived, through my own youthful folly," and his eyes instinctively glanced out of one of the windows in the direction of the cemetery, a mile away, where the wife whose loss he had never ceased to mourn over lay in her quiet grave.

There was more to be said, and Eric lost no time in saying it. "I have not been a good son to you, father—in fact I've been nothing but a disappointment. But I'm going to alter all that. I may not have any talent for business, but I will try to do my best anyhow."

The words gratified the father's heart, and yet he did not seem as keenly interested in the matter as Eric had expected him to be. Certainly he did not set his son an example of business application on that day. On a previous occasion, that of Eric's attack of scarlet fever, he was late at the office. On this one he was worse, and his demoralisation was surely complete, for he never went near it all day.

Having discharged his duty to his father, Eric was now confronted with the problem which, even while he had been talking in the library and before that, at the breakfast-table, had never for one moment left him—how to relieve the terrible suspense that was hanging over him as to Marian's attitude towards himself. He could hardly call upon her at a quarter to nine in the morning, and yet how was

he to endure it any longer, and even if he called later on, would he be admitted to her presence?

He was in a quandary, utterly bewildered as to what he ought to do, when the idea fortunately occurred to him that he would have a confidential chat with Elsie. She was Marian's best friend, and would know better than anyone else what was to be known and what was best to be done. So he sought her out, and they went away into a room by themselves, where they would be safe from interruption.

"Now, Elsie," he said, "you must just tell me everything about Marian. I feel desperately anxious about her and simply don't know what to do next. What a mess I have made of things!"

"Well, of course she was very much worried about it," Elsie replied. "She never said a word to anyone except myself, and then only because I made her talk to me."

"How could she help being worried?" Eric said. "What a brute I was to behave as I did."

"Well, hardly a brute," she said, "for I know you did it thoughtlessly, but you are too soft-hearted. Oh why did you let that girl get such a hold on you? You should have been more discreet you know."

"But we were neither of us to blame," Eric said. "She was such an innocent young thing, and I only behaved kindly to her, as any man would have done to a child, for she was really nothing more than that."

"Well I don't know I'm sure," Elsie said. "There was not much of the child about her letter. Marian told me what was in it, and it struck me as the work of a clever, designing woman."

"Her——" and Eric's face was a study in blank amazement. How Ma-Mi, who did not know a word of English, could have written to Marian, of

whose existence she had never heard, baffled his understanding. Then a glimmering of the truth dawned upon him.

"Look here, Elsie," he said, "we are at cross-purposes somehow. Who is it you are talking about?"

"Why, Miss Watson of course," she said.

"And what on earth did Miss Watson write to Marian for?" he asked her hurriedly.

"She never did," Elsie replied; "she wrote to Lerman."

The whole truth flashed across Eric's mind now, and for the moment it staggered him. Then with a forbidding look on his face he said, "And what did she tell him?"

"She said you were practically engaged to her; had paid her a deal of attention, and so on."

"The daring of her," he exclaimed. "She certainly pestered me enough in all conscience, but I never once encouraged her by word or look, and was only too thankful to see the last of her. Her father made me promise to stay with them on my return, and I dreaded meeting her again."

And Elsie's eyes brightened as she heard him say this, for she knew, from the fact that he said it, that it was the truth.

"The best thing you can do is to tell me the whole story from the beginning. It is a good thing I have seen you before going to see Marian."

So Elsie told him all that she had heard from Marian—the indifferent tone of his letters, the one of his in which he had made such frequent mention of Miss Watson, and her letter to Lerman coming just on the top of it; of the rumours too as to what Eric had said about being sick of his engagement. Then of his long silence. It was an incriminating

list, and when Elsie finished speaking he sat down with a listless air, and for some minutes neither of them spoke.

During that silence it dawned on Eric that instead of having to fill up a gap, he had a complicated plot to unravel.

"What a hopeless entanglement it is, Elsie," he said; and as he gazed disconsolately out of the window his face looked drawn and careworn. Then he reddened slightly, as he awkwardly asked, "What about Lerman? has he dared to carry matters any further and make love to Marian?"

"I can't say," she replied. "You see we only returned from Bournemouth a week or two ago, but, from what I have heard, Mr Barclay has been encouraging him to do so. Anyhow, the only thing for you to do is to see Marian for yourself. You will find out everything then. And don't be hard on her; remember that appearances have been terribly against you. Don't be impatient either, and be so foolish as to give her up if she does not fling herself into your arms all at once. Tell her your side of the story and leave her to decide for herself."

"You need have no fears on that score," he said; "I am not the headstrong chap I was six months ago. I've had a bit of common sense knocked into me since then."

"And do you know," she said, "I think it would be better for me to see Marian first and tell her you are here, and see what she says. I feel sure she will see you if——" and as she hesitated Eric finished the sentence for her by saying, "If it is not too late."

When Elsie returned half an hour later she said, "Marian will see you whenever you call. I told her I had had a talk with you, but did not say,

anything more. I thought you had best tell her all about it yourself."

"And what did she say?" Eric feverishly inquired.

Elsie paused in a puzzled way before answering. "She said, 'I will listen to what he has to say, but perhaps he will not think it worth his while after he has heard something I feel it my duty to tell him about myself.'"

And Eric's heart sank as he heard those words.

CHAPTER XXXIX

TROUBLED HEARTS

THE heart of the man who stood on the doorstep of the Barclay's house was throbbing painfully, but not more so than that of the girl who sat in the dining-room waiting for him. The beating of it almost prevented her from hearing his footsteps as they crossed the hall, until the door opened and he stood before her. As she saw the hollows on the once rounded cheeks, her first thought was one of pity for him.

"Good morning, Marian, how are you?"

"Quite well, thank you; how are you, Eric?" And they shook hands, just as ordinary friends might have done. But the mind of each turned instinctively to the mode of their parting only six months before, and noted the difference in their meeting of to-day.

"It is very good of you to let me come," he said. "It is more than I deserve."

"Don't be too hard on yourself, Eric, until you have heard what I have to say."

There was no excitement in their manner, for they were both as cool and collected as if they had been discussing the weather. Yet it was not the coolness of indifference, but the sheer calm of despair in both their hearts.

"Elsie told me what you said to her at Bournemouth," he said, but it is only right to you that you

should tell it me yourself. You need not spare me in any way, but just tell it plainly and speak as you feel about it."

"It all began with my own silly selfishness," she said, and when he would have protested she checked him, saying, "No, it is best you should hear it through. Just because you were enjoying yourself so much I began to think that you did not care for me as much as you had done. Then I heard from both Mr Lerman and a friend of father's what you had been heard to say about our engagement. Then when your letter came you seemed to be rather taken up with Miss Watson, though I would not have thought much of that if it had not been for the one she wrote to Mr Lerman at the same time. And he was so kind and considerate that I lost my dread of him, and did not keep him at a distance as I had done before. Then, gradually and naturally as it seemed, he began to take your place in my life."

She paused, and Eric could not make head or tail of it all. He had come to answer her charges against himself, and instead of that she seemed to be making a confession of her own.

"Then your letters ceased to come, and we did not know where you were. And Mr Lerman was very sympathetic, and I must have encouraged him without knowing it, for he began to make love to me, and you were very far away, and I had never thought to see you again. Then one morning, only two hours before I heard you were safe and coming home, he asked me to marry him."

She trembled as if she would have fallen, and he gently made her sit down on the couch.

In a voice that was choking with anxiety he said,
"And did you say yes?"

"I did not say yes," she replied, "but I am ashamed to say that I did not say no. Now if you care to tell me anything about yourself you can do so"; and her voice was weary and hopeless, as of one who had finished a hard task that might avail little after all. For she knew that she had put his love to a terrible test. She had only told him that she had not said no, and that was all he knew about it.

Staring hopelessly out of the window, he said, "In any case it is only right that you should hear my side of the matter. It was my own foolish ignorance that made me refrain from saying what I felt towards you. As for Miss Watson, it is a case of my word against hers, and I would not ask you to accept mine without any proof."

"But I would accept it," she eagerly interrupted, "for one thing I do know, and that is that you would never say that which was not true."

"It was false from beginning to end," he said, "and as for paying her any attentions, the boot was on the other foot. In regard to my disappearance in the jungle, I have no excuse to offer; it was my own fault, and I blame myself bitterly for it. I was enthralled with the wonder of the East, and did not know what I was doing, but I was sadly to blame for ever having let it get such a hold upon me.

"And as to all that Lerman has charged me with, I will prove the falseness of it, however long it takes me." And he spoke with energy and determination, and his eyes got back some of their old fire and glow.

Once more she interrupted him saying, "I have told you already that I trust your word," but he would have none of it.

"I thank you for your confidence, and appreciate

it very much indeed, but it is a serious matter, Marian, and needs more than mere trust. It demands clear and positive proof of my innocence; and that proof you shall have even if"—and the light died out of his eyes again—"even if it makes no difference in the end. To begin with, Lerman shall repeat those statements in my presence and yours. He shall come here this evening, and I will meet him face to face, and your parents shall be in the room at the time."

With that he said good-bye and went out, and though his heart was heavy within him he lost no time in making his arrangements.

First of all he went to Mr Barclay's office, and his interview with that gentleman was short and to the point. He concluded by saying, "I shall expect Lerman there at eight o'clock, and if he is not there I will scour the town till I find him, and drag him to your house." And his manner left no doubt in the mind of his hearer that he fully meant what he said.

Then he called on Miller, but found he had gone to a case in the country, so he looked up his old friend Sanderson instead.

Jim was delighted to see his chum, and they had a long chat together. In the course of it Sanderson said, "By the way, I had a letter from Dick Marshall not long ago; I see from what he says that the eternal woman has been on your track. It makes me thankful that I'm neither tall nor good-looking."

What had Marshall said about him? Eric wondered. Was he going to make mischief next? But Sanderson's next words set his mind at rest.

"I was thankful to hear that you weren't having any, and that you kept clear of her as much as possible. Dick says she pursued you in the most

relentless manner, and that you were so sick of it that you shortened your visit to Rangoon in consequence. She is a dangerous person, he says, and nearly landed him for breach of promise one one occasion without the slightest ground for doing so."

"Look here, Jim, do you mind if I take that letter away with me? I feel sure Marshall would not mind if he knew."

"Delighted, I am sure," Sanderson replied; "do what you like with it."

Then Eric went along to Plowitz's hotel, and was fortunate enough to find that amiable foreigner in his room. He told him of his intentions in regard to Lerman, and Plowitz encouraged him to persist in them. He further said, "I owe Mrs Barclay a call in return for her hospitality, and might chance to come there at the same time. I should like to make sure of meeting Mr Lerman this time. There are one or two little matters I want to talk over with him."

The expression on Eric's face must have revealed the question that he was longing to ask, for Plowitz added with his beaming, innocent smile, "You see we are fellow-countrymen, and come from the same town."

And with that Eric had to be content in the meantime.

CHAPTER XL

PLOWITZ'S STORY

LERMAN did not fail to appear at Mr Barclay's house that evening. He would not have stayed away in any case, for he knew that if he did so all his plots and schemes would have been so much waste time.

"Now repeat what you charged me with saying about my engagement," Eric said to him. And Lerman repeated it and also adhered to it.

"Ask Mr Barclay," he said; "he heard it as well as myself."

"Who told it to you, Mr Barclay?" Eric asked him.

"It was a friend," he replied, looking very red and uncomfortable.

"Was that friend Mr Lerman here?" Eric asked him point-blank.

And Mr Barclay could not deny it.

Lerman intervened by saying that he had made Mr Barclay promise not to say anything about it to Marian, as he did not wish to give her pain.

"Then why did you make a point of telling it to me yourself?" Marian asked him, and Lerman saw that he had made a slip.

"Because you asked me if I had ever heard him say any such things about you. You said you had ceased to trust him for some time past."

He had overshot the mark this time, and the look of withering scorn with which she regarded him told him that after this he might as well

try to obtain the moon as win Marian Barclay. The thought made him desperate, and there was only one thing left to be done. If he could not have this girl for his wife he determined that Eric Rankin should not have her either.

"You would try to make out that you never said anything of the sort," he asked her with a sneer. "I suppose you will say next that you never promised to marry me. You remember," he said to Mrs Barclay, "finding us hand in hand one morning?"

"Yes," Marian said, her voice trembling with indignation at the audacity of his speech, "but it was you who had seized my hands against my will."

"It is all very well to say that now after your so-called lover has turned up. I presume——" but what he presumed will never be known, for at that moment the door opened and the maid announced Mr Plowitz.

Plowitz's smile was even more childlike than usual as he shook hands all round, except with Lerman, who looked as if he had seen a ghost, and was quietly backing towards the door.

"You might guard that door, Mr Rankin," Plowitz said. Then, turning to Mr Barclay, he apologised for intruding upon them in this manner. "As I am here, however, I may as well let you know what sort of individual you have been admitting to your family circle. I happen to know a good deal of his doings.

"I may explain," he said, "that I am a detective, and that my principal office is in Konigsberg. My work is sometimes political, sometimes criminal investigation. Among other places, it brought me to Glasgow last winter, and you kindly asked me to dine with you, as you had a friend

called Lerman from Konigsberg. To my disappointment Mr Lerman did not turn up, but sent a wire to say he was detained on business. As a matter of fact, he did turn up, but did not come farther than the garden. For reasons of my own, I had suspected that he might possibly not wish to meet me, and therefore instructed one of my assistants—whom I frequently take with me for—er—business purposes—to keep a look-out in the road. That assistant saw Mr Lerman creep up to the library window, look in, and then depart by the way he had come.

“It is nearly two years ago,” he continued, “since I was called upon to investigate a bank robbery in Konigsberg. A large amount of money in gold and notes had disappeared. No trace of the thief could be found until the authorities received an anonymous letter telling them to search the lodgings of a young clerk named Meyerbeer and to look behind the fireplace in the bedroom. They did so, and some of the missing notes were found there. Meyerbeer had locked up the strong-room on the evening of the robbery, and, notwithstanding that he strongly protested his innocence, he was sentenced to a term of imprisonment.

“Two months later another robbery took place and a still larger amount was stolen. Inquiries were set on foot, and at last suspicion fixed itself upon a certain individual. It was decided to keep a close watch upon him, but he must have got an inkling of this, for he stayed away from the bank for a time on the plea of illness, and then took a voyage round the world for the benefit of his health.

“For this reason, and also because there was as yet no evidence to incriminate him, no attempt

was made to detain him. For my own part, I had never been satisfied as to the verdict in regard to young Meyerbeer, and expressed myself in these terms to the bank authorities after the episode of the second robbery. Hence I was instructed to make what investigations I thought fit in order to ascertain any facts which might throw light upon the mystery. In the course of these I found out that a couple of days after the theft with which Meyerbeer was subsequently charged a young man called at Meyerbeer's lodgings. On being told he was not at home he said he would wait for him. He went in, without, however, giving his name. At the end of a quarter of an hour he came out of the room and said that he would call back, which he never did. The description of this man corresponded exactly to that of the clerk who disappeared after the second robbery. His name was Maurice Lerman."

Everyone glanced in a shock of surprise at the man in question, who with pallid face and shaking limbs attempted to ejaculate something, but was promptly checked by Plowitz, who continued:

"Since then we have been piecing the links together. When Mr Barclay asked me to meet a Mr Lerman here last winter it struck me as scarcely possible that it could be the same man, but I was curious to see. Mr Lerman, as you know, did not appear at the dinner, but the episode witnessed by my assistant confirmed my suspicions. I intended to prolong my stay in Glasgow in order to satisfy myself on the point, but the next morning had to leave for a distant part, no matter where, on international matters connected with my Government. One of my assistants took up the work, and obtained other details which proved without a shadow of doubt that the clerk named

Lerman had committed both robberies and had incriminated young Meyerbeer by placing some of the notes in the chimney; also the fact that this gentleman here with us is the man we want.

"We must admire his stupendous impudence in daring to return to Europe. He was actuated no doubt by the fact that no further steps had been taken by the authorities. He did not, however, return to his duties at the bank; but, at his suggestion, Mr Lerman, senior, wrote to Mr Barclay, with the object of getting him to take him into his office to learn shipping. The matter had not been made public, even in Königsberg, and even his father knew nothing of the suspicions that had been directed against him, so that Mr Barclay could not possibly have heard anything of the matter.

"Our host, therefore, took him, and found him what he is, an extremely able young man. He seems to have taken such a fancy to him as to entrust him with the master-key of the office and the right of entry to his private sanctum during his absence. Ach! you Britishers! you are a trustful people." Then, shaking his head reflectively, he continued:

"Just before my return from—well, from foreign parts—I received word that the chain of evidence was at last complete, and that one of my assistants would meet me on my arrival with the details. After joining the steamer at Suez I had the inestimable pleasure of making the acquaintance of this gentleman," bowing to Eric Rankin, "and in the course of conversation Mr Lerman's name cropped up. It was soon evident to me that Lerman had a better card to play than commonplace robbery this time, and had come to the conclusion that it would pay him vastly better to

secure the hand of his employer's daughter. He is not likely, however, to have the chance of forcing his attentions upon her for some time to come, as I have an extradition order and a warrant for his arrest in my pocket."

With a white, drawn face, Lerman looked round at the door, but Eric's huge form blocked the way and he saw that he was trapped. With a moan he fell forward on his face, apparently lifeless. There were cries for brandy, and Eric rushed out to the dining-room to get it. Lerman, however, was a clever rogue and, as we have already seen, was a clever actor into the bargain.

Before anyone could realise what was happening, the prostrate man, who was no more fainting than Plowitz himself, sprang to his feet, and was out of the room and the front-door like a flash.

The men gave chase, but he was too quick for them, and not one of them has seen Maurice Lerman to this day. Once more he escaped the consequences of his crimes, but the investigation had done some good, for young Meyerbeer was set free and received a full and gracious pardon for the robbery he had never committed.

On their return to the house after their fruitless chase, Mr Barclay insisted on Mr Plowitz staying to have some refreshment. He was extremely anxious that the aid of the police should not be called in, as he did not wish the matter made public. It was painful enough for him to be brought so low in the estimation of his own woman-kind. Of course, in accordance with his usual custom, he did not acknowledge himself altogether in the wrong. He suggested, to save his own face, that there might possibly be some mistake after all. He did, however, go so far as to say that he would have a fresh set of locks put on the office

doors next day, as Lerman had a master-key in his possession.

It would perhaps have been more discreet if he had seen about a fresh set there and then.

Meanwhile Eric and Marian had been left by themselves and were having a little conversation of their own, and on the results of that conversation hung the issue of two young lives.

CHAPTER XLI

A MOMENTOUS INTERVIEW

WHEN Marian and Eric were left alone, after the excitement of Lerman's dramatic flight, neither of them spoke or even looked at one another for the space of some minutes. The ticking of the clock, the only sound that reached their ears, seemed to them as the hand of fate pointing they scarce knew whither, and each felt that their lives and all their future happiness were hanging in the balance.

The silence was broken at last by a commonplace, as such silences usually are. Eric asked her if she was cold, for he had noticed that she shivered.

"No, I am not cold, thank you," she said. Then she suddenly broke down, and sinking on to a couch, and burying her face in the cushions, she burst into tears. "Oh, the horror of it, the horror of it," was all she could say.

What was tearing out her heart and cutting her to the quick was the horror of the thought that this villain who had just fled out into the night had spent so much time under their roof, had held her hands in his, and had gazed into the depths of her soul. Her frame shook with her sobs, and Eric bent over her trying to comfort her. He touched her hair as though to stroke it, as he used to do, and then withdrew it, as he bethought himself that he had forfeited this right.

Gradually she quieted down, and at last lifted her head from the cushions. He was about to ask

her forgiveness for having brought all this pain upon her, when she anticipated him by saying in a heartbroken voice, "I have treated you shamefully, Eric; I ought to have trusted you more. Only let me explain myself. I did not finish what I was saying to you this morning. I told you that I had not said no to that man, but did not tell you why."

So then she recounted to him how she had been worn-out with all that she had had to encounter and was nearly distracted, and Eric was lost sight of, and she had no one to help her fight her battles; and how that man's terrible drawing eyes seemed to pierce her very soul and take away all power of resistance from her. "I felt like a helpless rabbit facing a snake, too terrified to move."

He looked at her very gently and compassionately. "Yes; but although the rabbit cannot run away, it is not because it does not want to do so. Was that your case, Marian?"

"Yes, it was just that," she said. "I loathed him in my heart, but that does not excuse me. Oh Eric, you can never love me any more, but tell me you forgive me."

"No, I would not insult you so," he said. "The fault was mine, and it is I who need to ask for forgiveness."

But that she would not hear of. Hers was the greater fault, she insisted.

For a few moments Eric paused, and then said, "We seem to have come to a deadlock, Marian. The only thing I can suggest is that we wipe the slate clean and make a new start. Will you agree to my beginning my courting over again? You are dearer to me to-day than you have ever been before, and that is saying a great deal. Let me hope that some day I may win your love once more."

And she agreed to this.

So they started afresh, and it was without doubt the shortest courtship on record, for it lasted barely half a minute. And when she found herself with her head comfortably nestling against his broad chest, and his great protecting arms around her, she felt like some storm-tossed little boat that has come safely into harbour at last.

He was fondling her hand, and looking at one finger in particular, and when she saw the inquiring glance in his eyes, she blushed almost guiltily as it were.

"I took it off," she said, "when I thought I had—lost you."

And she clutched him convulsively as she said it. Then she jumped up and disappeared from the room. When she returned it was with something that she held in her closed hand, and she slipped the hand, and the something in it, into his. And when, for the second time in their lives, he placed that engagement ring on her finger, she did not exclaim at its beauty, as she had done on the first occasion, but hid her face on his shoulder and shed tears of thankfulness at the joy that had come back to her, and trembling too, as she thought of the fate that might have been theirs.

After that they talked together for a long time, but it is not for us to pry into what they said. Nor would it be possible to describe it even if it were desirable. There are two languages understood of those who converse, but of no one else. One is the talk of a mother to her baby, and the other that of a lover to his lass. In each case it seems to be perfectly intelligible to those concerned, but it is an unknown tongue to all the world beside.

He told her much of what he had done and seen,

for she loved to hear it now. Only one thing he did not tell her of and that was his unfortunate experience with Ma-Mi. He had taken Elsie's advice on that subject which was to the effect that he was not to blame in the matter, and it would only puzzle Marian, who could not be expected to understand the inns and outs of the question. It was far better all round to say nothing about it. Whether he was wise in refraining from this topic, it was for the future to decide.

CHAPTER XLII

BY-PATHS AND HIGHWAYS

WHEN Eric Rankin awoke next morning he lay still for some time wondering if the events of the previous evening had been a dream which would fade away and leave him once again in the agony of suspense that he had endured only twenty-four hours before. That Marian was his, and all the doubts and difficulties cleared away, seemed too good to be true.

It was no dream, however, and as he dressed he thought that he was the most fortunate man on the face of the earth, as perhaps he was.

Soon after breakfast he set off to Mr Barclay's office. He had not seen him or Mrs Barclay on leaving their house the night before. His second courtship had been so perfect and so idyllic that he could not bear to spoil it by an interview with Marian's father and any discussion that might arise in the course of it. This morning, however, duty demanded that he should tell him what had taken place, and the prospect of doing this was the only cloud in his marvellously blue sky. He had no idea what course that gentleman would pursue, or what further obstacles he would seek to place in their way.

He need not have worried himself, for when he reached the office and entered the private room devoted to the head of the firm, Mr Barclay greeted him effusively, saying how pleased he was that he had come back safely. He had evidently forgotten

to mention the fact when Eric called on the previous day. His next words, however, nearly took Eric's breath away.

"Well, we have got rid of that scoundrel at last," he said in a manner that would lead one to suppose that he had spent most of his time of late in trying to achieve this feat. To give Mr Barclay his due, he always did things thoroughly, even if it was in contradicting himself.

Yet through it all Eric could not help noticing that there was a strain of agitation in his bearing; and this was not to be wondered at, for when Mr Barclay had arrived at his office an hour previously it was to find the place in a state of commotion. The safe had been opened, and all the available cash removed. To add insult to injury, a card bearing Lerman's name was lying on Mr Barclay's desk, with a neat p.p.c. in the corner, and a pencilled scrawl to say that he had left the duplicate safe-key—which he had evidently had made at some time during his employer's absence—as he had no further use for it.

Lerman had colossal impudence, but he must have been possessed of amazing courage at the same time.

So after all Eric's interview with his future father-in-law, to which he had looked forward with dread, was no ordeal, and it ended in Mr Barclay inviting him, along with his father and sisters, to dine with them that evening.

Eric found plenty to occupy his time during the day with the work of unpacking his luggage, which had come on from Liverpool by the steamer. The rubies, we are pleased to say, arrived home safe and intact, and caused unbounded delight to the three girls who were the fortunate recipients of them.

The dinner was a great success, and the host was geniality itself. He proposed the health of the happy young couple, and when he informed the company that their engagement was the consummation of his dearest hopes, Marian nearly disgraced herself by staring at him with wide-open incredulous eyes, and then choking with amusement as she caught Eric's glance.

On reaching home again Eric went with his father into the library, to carry out a resolve that had been in his mind for weeks past.

"I have been a failure at my work ever since I went to the office," he said. "Now I am determined to try and do my best, even if it is not a very brilliant one. I shall be ready to start in the morning." He said it bravely, but it cost him much, for he felt that he was for ever turning his back on the tempting by-ways of art to tread the dusty highroad of business, for which he had neither liking nor aptitude. He was disappointed, after making the sacrifice, that his father merely said "Quite right," and did not appear nearly as gratified as Eric had expected him to be.

On the following morning as soon as breakfast was over, Eric said, "Now, dad, I am ready to go with you."

They left the dining-room, but instead of going to the hatstand Mr Rankin led the way upstairs, and beckoned to Eric to follow him. "I thought it would be better for you to work at home," he said, and Eric's spirits went down into his boots. It was bad enough at the office, where at any rate you had other people to talk to, but in this solitude it would be absolutely intolerable.

They went along the corridor to the wing which had always been used as a sick-bay, whenever there was illness in the house. Mr Rankin opened the

door and held it for his son to pass in, and as he did so Eric stood stockstill. There was no office, but a perfectly appointed studio, with everything the heart of an artist could desire, including a glass roof with sliding blinds. It was complete to the last detail; not one item had been omitted.

"What on earth does——" But when he looked round his father had disappeared, and on rushing down the stairs he was just in time to catch him, as he was stepping into the brougham, and to drag him back to the library in a most unfilial manner.

"I cannot understand it, father," he said.

Mr Rankin did not answer for some moments. He had a lump in his throat which interfered with his powers of articulation. At last, in a husky voice, he said, "My boy, I have made a mistake with you all your life, and have tried to make amends for it. I had no right to force you against your natural inclinations, or to prevent you from exercising your natural talents. But even before you were born it was my ambition to see a son carrying on the business after me."

And a lump rose up in Eric's throat as the last few words revealed to him something of the sacrifice his father had made on his behalf.

Then they parted; but Eric did not go up to the studio, as might have been expected. He got his hat and rushed off to tell Marian.

CHAPTER XLIII

THE STUDIO

AFTER that it seemed to Eric as if time had taken wings to itself, the weeks and months flew past so quickly. Determined as he had been to do his duty and to follow the path he had mapped out, yet he had felt like a man condemned, for the rest of his life, to carry a burden up a never-ending hill. Now that the load had so suddenly and unexpectedly been lifted from his shoulders, he stepped out, like a giant refreshed, to do the work that lay so near to his heart.

He felt within him, too, a strange sense of power, an ability to get a grip on his art, such as he had never before experienced. Perhaps, after all, the years of repression had not been a bad thing for him, but had brought his talents to fruition as nothing else could have done. Faculties are like living beings, either human or animal; it is only they who have felt the curb who can thoroughly appreciate the benefits of freedom.

The studio, over which his father had spent so much time and forethought, was like a heaven upon earth to the man who exercised his beloved art in it from day to day. A certain young lady would often drop in to see how the pictures were getting on, and would be invited to stay while he worked. It sounds a delightful arrangement, but had one drawback in that inevitable interruptions were liable to occur, until at last Marian told Eric that she would not come any more. He retorted that it

was all her fault. She spoiled the pictures just as she had spoiled the view in Arran two years before. When she was sitting there in front of him he had no eyes for anything else. So after that she made a practice of keeping in the background, well out of his sight, a proceeding he strongly protested against, but which considerably facilitated the work.

There was another visitor to the studio also. Eric had not forgotten his old friend Dagleish, who had always made him welcome in the student days. The poor fellow was in rather low water as his eccentric ways and careless habits had almost ruined the photographic business. He was so charmed with the arrangements in the studio that Eric had a part of it fitted up for his exclusive use; "Dagleish's corner," as they called it. The studio was not tidy by any means—which studio ever is?—but it is safe to say that Dagleish's corner was the messiest part of the whole place. Yet out of that corner there emerged wonderful pictures; weird allegorical things such as might be expected from the superstition-saturated mind of this Highlander. It was the turn in his fortunes, and he made a name for himself before Eric did, and no one was more delighted than the latter.

There were other old friends, too, who must not be left out: the old chums who had contributed to the enjoyment of the social evenings in the old studio behind the photographer's shop. It was at Mr Rankin's suggestion that one evening a week was set apart on their behalf, and it was like old times to see them all foregathered once more. The first time they came Dagleish complained of feeling respectable. There was a chair for every one, and he was not accustomed to such luxuries, he said. So next time Eric removed all the chairs

beforehand, and they had to find seats as best they could. No one enjoyed the joke more than Dagleish, but at the end of a quarter of an hour he again complained, this time of feeling stiff and sore. He was getting older every day, he informed them, and could not stand hardships, or hard seats either, as well as he could do at one time. So they brought the chairs back, and put him down in the most comfortable one they could find.

Shortly afterwards there was a tap at the door, and Mr Rankin looked in. Just for a moment, the force of old habit I suppose, Eric thought they must have been making too much noise. But it was not that at all. He shook hands with them all round, and said he was glad to meet them. Then he sat down in the chair which they had pulled forward for him, and was soon enjoying himself as much as anyone there. So far from detracting from the merriment of the evening, he contributed to it in no small measure. It was a revelation to Eric to find what a fund of humour and conversation his father possessed. It had been there all the time, but that barrier which had existed for so long between them had kept it under. The old gentleman even tried to smoke a cigarette, which one of the company offered him. He found a great difficulty in lighting it, however, and was as amused as the rest of them when it was pointed out to him that it was a gold-tipped one and that he had put the wrong end into his mouth.

On separating they promised to come again, but on one condition only, namely that Mr Rankin would put in an appearance, which he was delighted to do. The fact was that William Rankin was beginning to think that there was something in life which he had been missing, and that there is a light side to it which it is not well to neglect.

The result was that he began to feel young again.

Some months later a letter was brought up to the studio with the Indian postmark on its cover, and taking it up he recognised Dick Marshall's writing. The letter was not a long one. A man who spends his life in forest work and eats and sleeps pretty much where he can find a resting-place has not much opportunity for letter-writing. It ran as follows:—

“DEAR RANKIN,—Glad to hear you reached home safely, and are fit and well. Everything going much as usual here, except the mosquitoes, which get livelier every season. They are the only lively things in the country to my mind.

“I stopped at Py-am-bo on my way through the forest a few weeks ago. In case you should be worrying, for I know what a confoundedly conscientious fellow you are, I may tell you that Ma-Mi was married some time ago to a very decent young chap in the village. Also, just by way of taking the conceit out of you, she seems very happy. She is well-off on her handsome dowry, and cannot make out how her father ever managed to save so much money. She would be rather amazed if she knew the story of the Thakin, who sent it to her governor with strict injunctions that she was never to know where it came from. So all's well that ends well.

“Yours ever,

“R. MARSHALL.

“P.S.—I had nearly forgotten to tell you the latest Rangoon sensation. A foreign-looking Johnny turned up at the Watsons not long ago, who it appears had spent a few weeks here some time back. Old Watson tried to give him the cold shoulder,

but the fellow threatened something or other, nobody knows what, and finally the old man gave him a lump sum to clear out. He left next day, and Blanche went with him. It turned out afterwards that they had been married the day before. Anyhow she has gone, which is a source of congratulation to yours truly and a good many other fellows as well."

Eric read it through again, and then tore it up and threw the pieces into the fire. "Good old Dick," was his only comment. It was too late to paint any more, so he went downstairs and called to Marian, who was having tea with them that day, as indeed she usually was at that hour.

Marian was engaged in weightier matters, however, and could not come. "Don't be so impatient," she cried to him from the top of the stairs. "We're looking at hats."

"Hats," was the reply from below, delivered in that tone of superior contempt invariably assumed by man when referring to feminine foibles. But these were not ordinary hats, but headgear forming part of Janet's trousseau, for in a few weeks she would be Mrs Miller.

It had all come about through a conversation which Mr Rankin had held with a friend, whose son had recently gone into practice as a doctor. On being asked how Frank was getting on, the friend had replied. "He finds it very slow work. The difficulty, so he tells me, is that he can't make a practice till he is married, and can't marry till he has made a practice."

The remark set Mr Rankin thinking, and the result was that one evening, when Miller was dining with them, he called the doctor into the library and put the matter plainly before him.

Miller was of an independent turn of mind, however, and said he would take a wife when he could afford to keep her. He was not the sort of man to live on his father-in-law; so Mr Rankin called Janet in to join in the discussion, and she took Miller's part, as she always did, except when they were talking between themselves, and then she invariably took the opposite.

Her father was not to be beaten, however, so asked Elsie, Eric, and Marian, who had been left by themselves in the dining-room, to come and give their views.

"Fancy," Eric said, "having a sweet little morsel like that thrown at his head and refusing such a chance. He ought to be ashamed of himself."

Marian and Elsie also told him what they thought of him, and poor Miller had to give way at last. The whole family were turning against him, he said. It was enough to make him thin. Then he and Janet entered into elaborate calculations, in a corner by themselves, and, when they resumed the discussion, announced that they had formed a plan by which they could marry on Miller's means, with great emphasis on the word. They would be able to live very comfortably for a time, as the bridegroom would be able to subsist mainly on his own adipose tissue for ever so long, and the bride could add to the household resources by taking in plain sewing and going out charring.

They were just as silly as ever, these two, bless them. It is the silly people who keep the rest of us alive.

"Then that settles it," Mr Rankin said. And the wedding was arranged to take place in about a couple of months' time.

"Come along, Janet," Miller said, "and let us

get by ourselves and talk sense," and he put his arm around her and led her from the room. When he reached the door he turned, and raising his arm in a drastic manner exclaimed, "If you are all so determined to have me in the family, I have no course open to me but to submit. But," and he glared as fiercely as his rotund features would permit of, "I take my solemn oath before you all here present that I will not be married in a kilt." And with that he disappeared.

The others sat round the fire and talked together, mainly of Janet and her happiness in getting such a thoroughly good fellow for a husband. Then Marian turned to Eric and said, "I have not seen your picture for days; how is it getting on?"

"You had better come to the studio and judge for yourself," he told her. So they went out together, and as they looked back on reaching the door, they saw a picture in which beauty and pathos were charmingly blended. Elsie was sitting on the floor by her father's side, her hand in his. It was the very vision that this sweet unselfish girl had conjured up in her own mind long before, as constituting her path in life. Of marriage for herself she had never thought, since her lover had died a soldier's death years before. To be by her father's side, to comfort him in his old age, was all she now asked or desired for her lot.

"Poor Elsie," said Eric, as he and Marian mounted the stairs; "it is hard on her." But not so hard as they thought, in spite of the sorrow that had been hers, for to a nature that has no thoughts of self, there is a compensation in the sanctified privilege of ministering to the comfort of those who have, all our life through, given us of their tenderness and love.

Marian had no opportunity of forming an opinion

as to how the picture was getting on, for after Eric had lit up the studio he asked her a question that put pictures out of their heads.

"When is Janet's brother going to have a bride?" he said to her. "I am getting on well, and have sold more pictures already than I ever expected to do for years to come. By next year I ought to be able to set up a house of my own, for I am determined to do it by my own exertions. My case is entirely different from Jack's. People don't give artists the cold shoulder just because they are not married."

But she shook her head, though her heart was longing for this happiness as much as he himself was. "It is quite impossible to say, Eric. I could not leave mother in her present state of ill-health, and there does not seem much prospect of it improving. Father is not quite so overbearing as he used to be, though I hate having to use such a term of my own father, but he is so fussy that he nearly worries mother's life out of her. I can't bear the thought of leaving her. You won't think, will you, that it is because I don't want to be married?"

"I know better than that," he said as he took her in his arms, "and I will wait for you to the end of my life if need be."

He meant it too, but the thought of not having her by his side in the coming years was more than he dared contemplate.

CHAPTER XLIV

THE END

FIVE years had passed, and even London was looking bright and fresh in the May sunshine, as a stream of carriages and pedestrians made their way to the Academy for the opening day of the year. A visitor entering the building and walking through the various rooms would have noticed a crowd of people gathered round one particular picture. On the outskirts of the crowd a trim little elderly man was hovering, gazing with the deepest interest at the picture, or at least what he could see of it, and at the people about him. He appeared to have a cold in his head, for he blew his nose somewhat frequently, and there was a redness about his eyelids. He seemed desperately anxious to go nearer, but as though afraid to trust himself to do so.

As he hung about there, a conversation between two men who had just come in fell on his ears. "What's this?" one of them said to his companion.

The other man, a weird-looking object, with a great deal of tie and no collar to speak of, replied, "That's the picture by Rankin, the fellow who is making such a name." And he ought to have known, for he was the greatest art critic of the day.

"Wonderful chap," he went on to say; "one of the best landscape painters of the day."

The old gentleman's cold seemed suddenly to become worse, for he blew his nose at least six or seven times in succession.

"Oh, there he is," continued the speaker; "that big man over there, looking at that rummy thing of Dagleish's. That's his wife with him. I'll introduce him to you if you like; he's moving in this direction."

He did not get the chance, however, for Marian had seen Mr Rankin, and taking his arm she said, "Come along with us, grandpa, we're just going to have some tea." They took him off between them, and he did not get near the picture after all. That did not trouble him, for he had seen it oftentimes before. It was the crowd collected around it that had made him such a proud, happy man that afternoon.

Eric and Marian had been married for three years, and he simply doted on her. The girl with her winning smile could twist this big man round her little finger. In proof of which we may state that she turned him out of his studio for three hours every Monday morning while she had the place cleaned up and made respectable. And everyone who knows what an artist is knows what that means.

There was only one thing he would not do for her. When an idea for a picture occurred to her, she used to tell him of it and he would draw it. Soon after they were married she planned one which she was certain he could paint better than anyone else, and which would be his finest piece of work, and there is little doubt but that she was correct on both points. It was a picture of a Burmese village, with charming creeper-covered huts, waving palm trees beyond, and a pretty little Burmese girl in the foreground. But she never could persuade him to carry out her idea, and she could never make out why.

The atmosphere in the Academy was becoming

sultry, so they hunted up Elsie and Dr and Mrs Miller, who had come to London for this auspicious occasion. Miller shook Eric's hand warmly and offered his congratulations at the success of his picture. "And I, too, am a proud man to-day," he said, drawing himself up to his full height.

"What have you done? Been appointed Physician to the Queen?"

"No, not quite that; but I have just paid back your father every penny of the money he advanced me when I was struggling to make a practice. Much to his disgust, too, I may add." He was as elated as if the highest honours of his profession had fallen to his lot, and Eric admired him for it.

Someone suggested going to a restaurant for tea, but Marian said, "Why not go home and have it comfortably all together? Father is there by himself, and was very disappointed because his gout prevented him from coming to see the pictures."

The dear girl did not wish him to be left out in the cold. He may have had his faults, but he was her father after all, and he had been a lonely, chastened man during the four years of his widowerhood.

So they all made their way back to the pretty little house in Hampstead, and were glad they had not stayed to tea in town, for they found another visitor there, chatting to Mr Barclay. Mr Plowitz had never failed to call on his friends, either in Glasgow or London, whenever his duties called him to the British Isles, and he always found a hearty welcome awaiting him. His presence on this day of days was particularly acceptable, and his beaming smile added a touch of warmth to their reunion, if such were needed.

There was another member of the company, too, who received more attention than all the rest of them put together. A little fair-haired boy of two years old, who was not a bit like his great, swarthy father, and only very slightly like his mother, but the very model of "gampa," as he called Mr Rankin. In fact, the proud grandfather used to say that the only way you could distinguish between them was that his grandson had more hair on the top of his head.

As the little chap sat beside the elderly man at tea, there was no doubt as to whom he took after. "He's a Rankin, you know," said the latter, turning to Mr Plowitz, "and seems to be in a fair way to tread in the footsteps of his forefathers. The greatest treat I can give him is to let him come to the office and sit on a stool. He will make the fourth generation in succession." Then noticing the visitor's eyes turning inquiringly towards Eric, he added, "Oh, we don't count him; he's only a freak."

Upon which Eric told Plowitz that his father had developed a sense of humour of late, and that he was at present passing from the funny stage to the insolent one. It was a sequence of events, he went on to say, not uncommon in people who were mentally afflicted.

All of which was very undignified on the part of Mr Rankin, and very unfilial on that of his son, but very delightful and very happy.

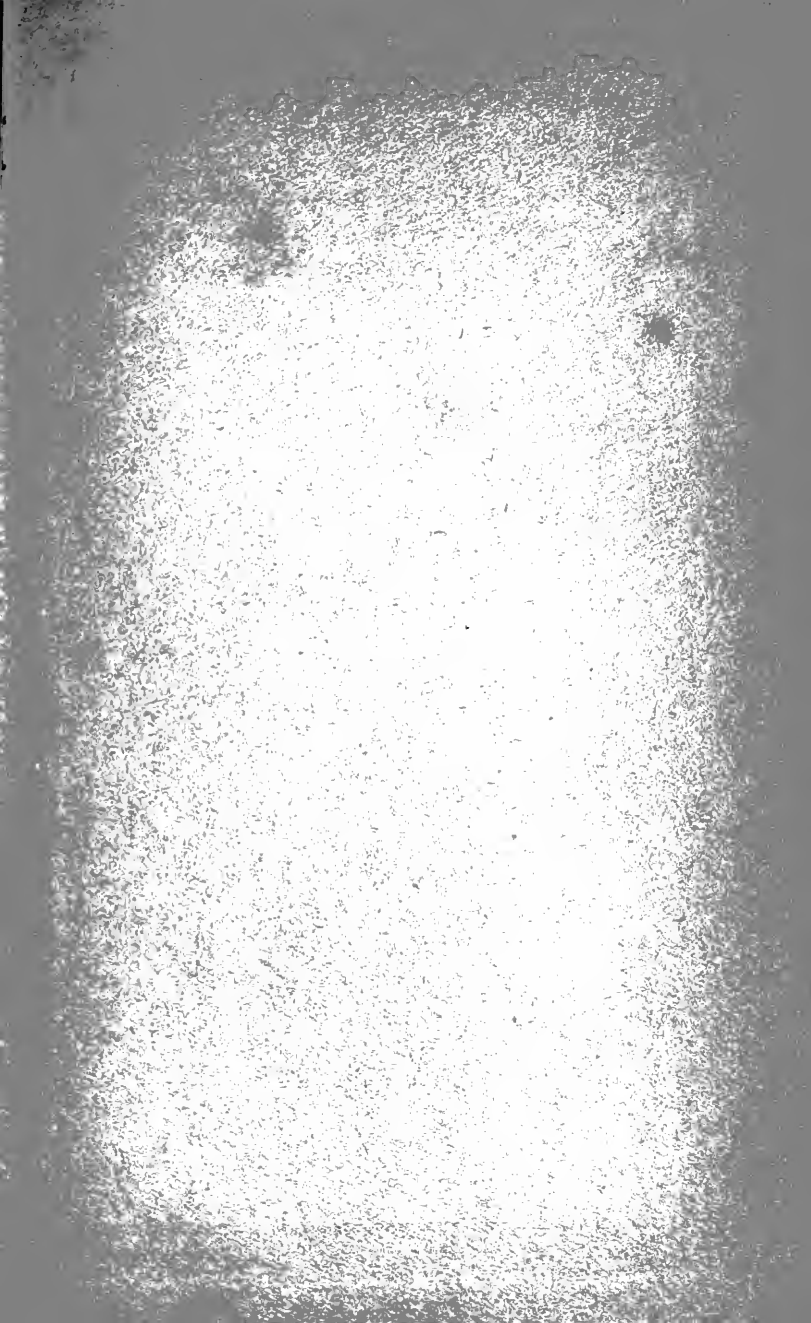
Little Billy had been in bed this hour past, and they had not had time to talk of half the things they had meant to, but had to make a move at last, as the younger members of the party were going into town for the evening.

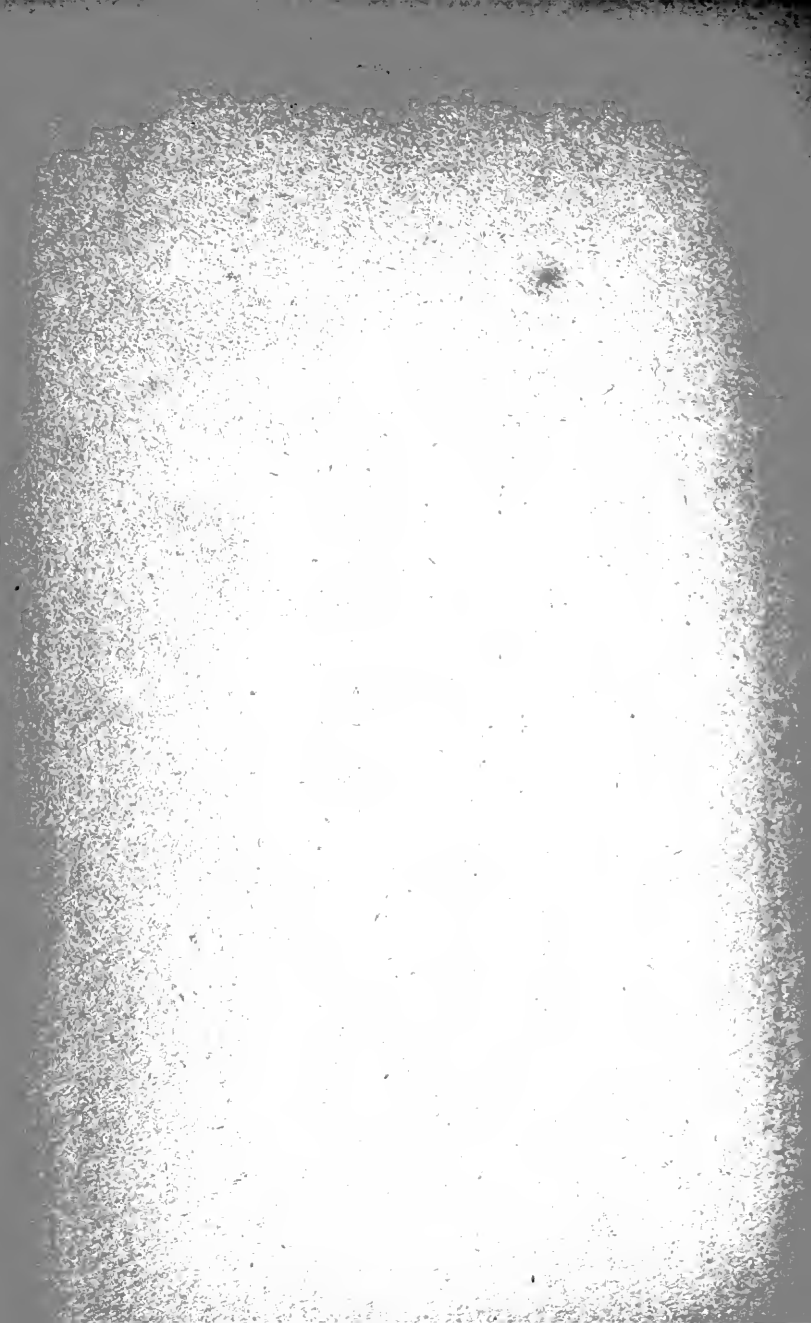
Eric and his wife went up to the nursery to give their sleeping boy his good-night kiss. As they

stood one on each side of the cot and looked down on the fair little head nestling on the pillow, their hearts were overflowing.

Then Eric leaned over, and putting his arm round his wife's neck, he drew her head towards his, and thus they framed their slumbering child in a bower of perfect and abiding love.

THE END







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